

NOVEL

2

Accomplishments *of the* Duke's Daughter



Written by **Reia**
Illus. **Haduki Futaba**

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Rudius

Gazell

Merellis

Louis

Berne

Iris



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Seven Seas Entertainment



DORSSSEN KATABERIA

Son of the knight captain.
Has a crush on Yuri.



EDWARD TONE TASMERIA

Second prince of the Tasmerian
Kingdom. Was engaged to Iris.



YURI NEUER

Daughter of Baron Neuer. Has built
a reverse harem at the academy.



IRIA FONS TASMERIA

The queen dowager. Lives away from
public life in the detached palace.



ELLIA

The current queen.
Edward's mother.



VAN LUTASHA

Son of the pope of the Darryl
Church. In love with Yuri.

characters

ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE DUKE'S DAUGHTER CAST OF CHARACTERS

LOUIS DE ARMELIA

The Duke of Armelia
and prime minister.



LUCA SAMOSA

The headmaster of Armelia's
academy. Former royal physician.

MERELLIS REISER ARMELIA

Wife to the Duke of Armelia.
Iris's mother and the
Flower of High Society.

RUDIUS GIB ANDERSON

Son of the Duke of Anderson.
Nickname is Rudy.

BERNE DARSHI ARMELIA

The Duke of Armelia's son.
Iris's younger brother.



GAZELL DAZ ANDERSON

A general and a marquis
of House Anderson.
Merellis's father.



DIDA

Iris's guard. Taken off the streets by her as a child.



LYLE

Iris's guard. Taken off the streets by her as a child.



IRIS LANA ARMELIA

Daughter of the Duke of Armelia. Regained memories from a past life.



REHME

Manages Duke Armelia's personal library. Taken off the streets by Iris as a child.



MERIDA

In charge of the Azuta Corporation's new food products. Iris took her in as a child.



TANYA

Iris's personal handmaid. Taken off the streets by her as a child.



MIMOSA DUNGLEY

Iris's best friend. Former classmate from the academy.



RAFIEL

Priest of the Darryl Church. Attends Armelia's academy of higher education.



DEAN

Temporary employee of the Azuta Corporation. Very skilled.

KOUSHAKU REIJOU NO TASHINAMI Vol.2

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Chapter 6:

The Duke's Daughter Goes to War

THE PALACE WAS DECORATED even more lavishly than usual tonight in honor of Foundation Day. Every year, the royal family hosted a party at the palace to celebrate the founding of the kingdom of Tasmeria.

Every noble in attendance wore their finest clothes—befitting such a fancy yet distinguished event—including the man who had just walked through the palace's great entryway. The palace itself had beautiful white walls. The high, arched ceilings were exquisitely painted, and each supporting column was intricately carved.

A large crowd of nobles had already gathered. They chatted here and there, as did those still making their way down the hallway to the main ballroom. The man who had just entered wore a beautiful suit—his best clothes, just like the rest of his fellows. But there was something different about him. His eyes were serious.

To a noble, this celebration was no mere party—it was a nest of bargains and schemes. Of course, they had all come to celebrate the founding of the kingdom, but the man knew he couldn't get caught up in the festive mood and forget the fete's true purpose. Years of holding his title as count had taught him that much.

He quickly scanned the crowd for a familiar face. If he didn't spy anyone he recognized, he would have no particular obligation to speak with anyone. Such were his thoughts as he made his way down the long hallway and arrived in the great hall, where the main event was held.

Within, a solemnly refined ambience defined the mood of the celebration. The ballroom had none of the lavish beauty of the entrance hall, but the most skilled craftsmen in the kingdom had poured their talents into the grand room. This lent it an intimidating beauty. Multiple chandeliers sparkled overhead, refracting the light of the ladies' dresses and making them luminous.

At last, the count spotted a gathering of people he recognized and greeted them. That put him slightly more at ease. The Foundation Day celebration required more vigilance than any other function.

For once, the factions supporting the first prince and the second prince—and the neutral faction—were all gathered under one roof. The count's social standing depended upon those he chose to converse with tonight. One wrong move, and he might well find himself in a situation that would prove incredibly difficult to extricate himself from. He hated to admit it, but it was the truth.

Just then, one of his closest friends came over, a genuine smile on his face. "Good to see you here, Count Dranbaldt."

At this salutation, Dranbaldt let out all the air he'd been holding in his lungs. "Yes, it's been too long. How do you fare, Count Caldina?"

Since this celebration was being held against the tense backdrop of the embattled factions, seeing a familiar face—and that of a good friend, moreover—was an incredible comfort.

"About the same since I last saw you. Oh, I suppose the only news is that my wife's been besotted with the Azuta Corporation and is dying to get one of their special memberships."

"Your wife too, hm? My wife awaits her membership as well. It seems it's something of a status symbol to be on their list nowadays."

"Speaking of the Azuta Corporation, that's Duke Armelia's business, is it not? Not only is he a shrewd politician—he's now trying his hand at running a company?"

"Yes, an enviable fellow, indeed."

"I couldn't say it better myself! By the by, Count Dranbaldt, who have you spoken with tonight?"

Their casual conversation veered into a most serious topic. The question could only even be asked because of the bosom friendship the two men shared.

"The usual faces. What about you? Who have you spoken to besides the regular crowd?" Dranbaldt asked with a wry grin, to which Caldina shrugged.

“Same here. In fact, I think I’ve spent more time worrying about who to engage with than actually engaging.”

“I can understand that.”

They both let out deep sighs.

“Look over there,” Caldina urged. Dranbaldt followed the man’s gaze. His eyes landed on Ellia, the second queen. Her flaming crimson hair was matched by a deep red dress edged with golden lace. Her jet-black eyes were demurely half-closed, her perfectly painted lips upturned in an alluring smile. Her father, Marquis Marea, stood by her side. A crowd of nobles surrounded them.

“Oh? I thought for certain that the queen would attend alongside the king as hostess of the fete.” Dranbaldt regarded the sight with surprise—not at the crowd of nobles but at the second queen. She always cleaved so close to the king’s side, and she used that closeness to maximize her appeal. She especially loved flaunting her influence at parties such as these, so it was quite odd to see her without her husband.

“Strange, isn’t it? I thought I was mistaken at first, too. Why wouldn’t she attend in the king’s company, tonight of all nights?”

“Hmm... Perhaps they’re too busy strengthening their position in other ways, or the king simply isn’t coming tonight? One of the two.”

“Come now. It’s Foundation Day! How could His Majesty not attend?” Caldina dismissed Dranbaldt’s theory with a laugh.

Faced with that logic, Dranbaldt had to agree. “It must be part of their strategy, then.”

“That makes the most sense. After all, look—even the minister of internal affairs is by Queen Ellia’s side.”

The minister of human affairs was one of the official positions that made up the backbone of the government. Besides the prime minister, there were the ministers of finance, defense, law, internal affairs, foreign affairs, infrastructure, and education.

“When did that happen? I knew he leaned toward Queen Ellia’s faction, but I

thought he espoused neutrality. She really is fond of flexing her power at these events.”

While the two counts conversed, another noble greeted Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea.

“The marquis likes us to know his power, too.”

“You’re right about that.”

The marquis had cultivated his influence for some time now, but his desire for power had grown even stronger after his daughter assumed her role as queen. Now he was one of the most powerful nobles in the kingdom, and his words carried great weight in the palace.

All of a sudden, a buzz ran through the crowd. Both counts turned toward the entrance. The second prince, Edward, had appeared alongside Yuri, Baron Neuer’s daughter. On either side of them came Van Lutasha and Dorssen Kataberia.

Van, the son of the pope of the Darryl Church, wore simple church vestments. Beside him, Dorssen was clad in a black suit befitting a noble’s son instead of his usual knight’s armor.

Meanwhile, Prince Edward wore a deep emerald suit that fit him perfectly. Yuri clung to his arm in a dress embroidered all over with flowers, bringing out her youthful loveliness. White lace and pale primrose-pink fabric peeked out from beneath cutouts along the skirt. It ruffled prettily with every step she took.

“Are you sure I belong here?” Yuri anxiously looked up at Prince Edward.

“What are you talking about? Of course you do. You’re my fiancée. Hold your head up high and carry yourself with dignity.”

“But...” Yuri’s gaze dropped.

Prince Edward let go of her and clasped her hand. “Yuri. I have vowed to walk by your side. Now and forever.”

“Prince Edward.” Yuri looked up at him with teary eyes.

Edward gave her a reassuring smile. “They’re only staring at you because you’re so adorable. Ahh, I hate it. I wish I could just lock you up somewhere so I could keep your lovely face all to myself!”

“There’s nothing to be anxious about,” Van murmured sweetly in Yuri’s ear, interrupting the romantic interlude. “I’ll protect you no matter what.”

Dorssen agreed and offered the same reassurance.

“Thank you two so much.” Yuri smiled at them, looking like a freshly bloomed flower.

“You are adored, Yuri, because you’re endlessly kind and because you’re so beautiful. But all you have to do now is keep your eyes on me. All right?” Edward said.

Yuri immediately turned bright red.

Their saccharine exchange complete, the nobles who had been awkwardly waiting for a chance to approach made their way over to greet the new couple. Such was the expected thing to do when a member of the royal family appeared.

But some hung back. Count Dranbaldt and Count Caldina were two of these.

“Amazing. So it’s true, Prince Edward really is head over heels in love with Ms. Yuri.” Dranbaldt mused with a wry smile.

“Yes, quite right. And it seems Prince Edward isn’t here as a host but as a guest. I realize he hasn’t yet succeeded the throne, but I thought for sure that he would take the role of host alongside Queen Ellia—to show her family’s influence. Well, things look awfully intimate between the prince and his lady, so perhaps he doesn’t mind.”

While the two men conversed, Prince Edward and his coterie made their way toward Queen Ellia. Upon noticing the prince’s approach, the nobles surrounding the queen made way for him.

“Oh, Edward! I know my bias as your mother, but you look simply dashing tonight!” Ellia said, clearly in high spirits.

“I’m honored to hear it, Mother. You look exquisite tonight as well.”

“You’re too kind. You look lovely too, Yuri.”

“I’m flattered to receive such a compliment from the queen, but if I’m being honest, I’m concerned I still look a bit too childish... If only I could be as beautiful and elegant as you, Queen Ellia.”

“Oh ho ho. You’re perfect just the way you are, Yuri. Now is the only time in life when you’re allowed to be so cute, so enjoy it while it lasts. You have your own charm, after all.”

“Thank you.” Yuri smiled shyly at the queen, who looked quite pleased and smiled right back.

“Van, Dorssen. I entrust the both of them to you,” Queen Ellia said. The two men bowed their heads in response. Then she frowned. “Hm? Is Berne not with you?”

Prince Edward shook his head. “No, he said he had a prior engagement...”

Queen Ellia’s expression grew distant for a moment, but then her usual smile overtook her face as if nothing had happened. “I see. Well, go ahead and enjoy yourselves tonight.”

With that, the queen resumed her conversation with her circle of nobility, leaving Prince Edward and his companions to themselves.

Counts Dranbaldt and Caldina studied Queen Ellia and her faction from afar. Then, once again, they heard a commotion near the entrance. They turned to see the prime minister, Duke Louis de Armelia, arrive alongside his wife, Duchess Merellis Armelia.

“Lady Merellis looks divine as usual,” Caldina whispered. Dranbaldt nodded in emphatic agreement. The two counts were just about the same age as the duchess. She was well loved by those of all ages but had a particularly fervent following among her peers, who considered her the pinnacle of beauty.

As those admirers watched her with ardent delight, she gracefully swept into the room, arm in arm with Duke Armelia. Tonight, she wore a gown in the latest

fashion—sky blue to match her eyes, with a midnight-blue shawl over her shoulders. From her elegant appearance to her every subtle movement, it was clear why she was called the Flower of High Society. A crowd of nobles flocked to greet her. The counts had thought the crowd around Prince Edward was large, but it paled in comparison to the one gathering around the duchess.

“Hm? What’s this?”

Suddenly, the entire room fell silent. Sensing the abrupt change of mood, the counts looked back and forth, searching for the source of the silence. It didn’t take them long at all to identify the proper direction—every noble near the entrance was completely frozen and focused on the same thing.

Who could it possibly be? Everyone of any note has already made their entrance, Count Dranbaldt thought as he followed their gazes with his own. Then he too was frozen to the spot, stunned by the sight before him.

The duke’s son, Berne Darshi Armelia, had come with a woman on his arm, and this woman was the one who had captured everyone’s attention.

“Beautiful...” Caldina murmured.

Dranbaldt couldn’t even respond; he was beside himself. Yet the same word echoed in his head.

The woman’s silvery platinum hair was so glossy, it not only caught the light but seemed to emit its own. Her delicate facial features and pale porcelain skin offset deep blue eyes, like flawless sapphires. Her antique-white dress, made of a luxurious, lustrous fabric, was unlike anything any of the other women wore. Furthermore, in lieu of the fashionable hourglass shape with puffed sleeves and voluminous skirts, the dress hugged her curves with a streamlined appearance. It suited her perfectly. The hem was elaborately embroidered with silver and blue thread. Finally, her waist was cinched with a deep blue sash that matched her beautiful eyes, accentuating their color even more.

The woman glowed beneath the light of the chandeliers. Her elegant figure inspired someone in the crowd to say, “She’s like a moon goddess,” without a hint of irony. No one could look away.

“Who is she? I’d never forget a woman so beautiful...” Dranbaldt whispered in

wonder.

Caldina tipped his head to the side. "If she's with Lord Berne... Wait, don't tell me that's Iris, the duke's daughter?!"

"It couldn't be. She was expelled from high society, remember? I understand this is Foundation Day, but she would never show her face in the palace of all places."

"Hm, I suppose you're right..."

However, while the two men were convinced the woman couldn't be Iris, she walked over to Duchess Armelia. The crowd swept away to make a path for her, though every eye remained quite enamored. They'd behaved just the same for Prince Edward, but privately, Count Dranbaldt thought that this woman carried herself even more regally than a member of the royal family.

Her very presence had altered the entire mood of the party. All eyes were on her, but she seemed unbothered by the attention as she stopped directly in front of the duchess and began speaking with her.

"It must be Lady Iris! She bears a rather striking resemblance to Her Grace..." Then another door opened, cutting Dranbaldt off mid-sentence.

In walked the queen dowager, Iria Fons Tasmeria, the highest-ranking woman in the kingdom.

Why is the queen dowager here but not the king? Caldina wondered, but he was quickly overcome by both a feeling of nostalgia and the automatic impulse to bow his head.

The queen dowager had once ruled this country after her older brother, the crown prince, passed away, leaving her the sole claimant to the throne. However, since no woman had ever sat alone on the Tasmerian throne, a duke had married into her family and the two had reigned together. During that era, she had hosted countless celebrations and fetes in her position as queen.

Once her son ascended to the throne, she had remained at the palace and continued to participate in functions for a time. She had since retired from public life and moved to the detached palace, a royal villa on the palace grounds. These days, she only rarely made appearances at any sort of event.

Head still bowed, Dranbaldt wondered what in the world could have brought her here.

The music stopped playing as the queen dowager's soft voice filled the room. "My people, you have all our thanks for joining us tonight in celebration of the founding of our kingdom. Unfortunately, the king is not feeling well this eve, and so he is at rest. He sends his deepest regrets that he was unable to attend."

Upon hearing this, a buzz ran through the nobles of the neutral faction, including Dranbaldt and Caldina.

The king is unwell.

Thus far, the tension between the factions had remained under the surface of kingdom politics, but the king's absence would likely intensify this friction. Perhaps the queen dowager hoped her appearance tonight would temper these conflicts? If that was the case, it would make perfect sense.

"We have endured many hardships, and we are only able to welcome this joyous day on account of the efforts of everyone here, and those of our citizens who have supported our kingdom. On behalf of the king, I thank you. Please have a wonderful time tonight, and enjoy yourselves."

As soon as the queen dowager finished speaking, the music began playing once more, and the party resumed.

The guests chatted and laughed, but their eyes drifted either toward the mysterious woman with Berne or toward the queen dowager. Then, of all things, the woman in question walked right up to the queen dowager, who had summoned her over. Once the nobles saw this, they forgot all about their own conversations and strained to hear the women's exchange.

"Iris Lana Armelia," said the queen dowager, "I've been so eager to see you. So much so, in fact, that I decided to attend this party for that very reason."

More whispers flew through the room. So she *was* Duke Armelia's daughter, Iris—that infamous woman, much talked of since her departure. Her return would have been shocking in and of itself. The fact that the queen dowager had just admitted to attending for the express purpose of seeing the duke's daughter rendered it quite impossible for any noble to hide their surprise.

“I’ve so looked forward to hearing about your success as the president of the Azuta Corporation—on top of the impeccable job you’ve done as acting governor of Armelia.”

That was all it took to make the nobles momentarily forget their every question and concern about the king. Yet another shock wave ran through the room.

“Did you hear that?” Caldina asked in disbelief.

“I certainly did. I can’t believe she’s in charge of *the* Azuta Corporation! Not only that, she’s simultaneously working as the acting governor of a domain?”

“I assumed that the duke himself had taken the helm.”

“I-I did as well... She really built one of the most prestigious companies in the kingdom at such a young age? And in only a few years? What an incredible talent...”

Meanwhile, the queen dowager continued her conversation with Iris. “I’m sure it’s not been without its hardships, of course. Please always feel free to come to me for advice if you run into any manner of difficulty.”

“You honor me with your offer.” Iris dipped into an elegant curtsy and withdrew. Even though she’d only exchanged a few sentences with her, she understood that the queen dowager had her hands full with greeting other guests. Once Iris left her side, another woman was summoned.

Iris attempted to slip into the background; did she hope to escape the limelight? All eyes remained focused on her.

“Why on earth do you think Prince Edward broke off his engagement with her?” Dranbaldt wondered aloud, thoroughly baffled.

“Why, indeed! You heard the queen dowager—that woman is invaluable. Being the president of the Azuta Corporation is attractive in itself, but think of the wealth she must have accrued through it. And on top of that, the influence she has with the queen dowager! Every noble in the kingdom is here, and *she* was the first person summoned. Then the queen dowager offered her personal advice! That woman more or less just received the backing of the most powerful person in the royal family, and in front of everyone who’s anyone.”

“Yes... She has beauty, talent, lineage, backing... Any one of those on its own would make her a perfect match. Why, I’d say she has all the qualities one might wish for in a woman near to the throne. But instead, Prince Edward slighted her, broke their engagement, and immediately engaged himself to another woman! It leaves a terrible impression, frankly.”

“But fortuitous for the first prince’s faction.”

Indeed, if Prince Edward’s marriage to Iris had succeeded, he would have had the backing of the two most powerful noble houses in Tasmeria, Marea and Armelia, the latter of which included the prime minister. In that case, his ascension to the throne would have been all but guaranteed. Yet he had thrown it all away.

The question now was how Iris would reenter the fray. The first prince had no fiancée. If Iris did somehow marry him, the two would stand a real chance of unseating the second prince, whose greatest weapon was the backing of House Marea and their supporters.

No doubt, the as yet neutral faction was inwardly snickering while the first prince’s supporters were over the moon. Meanwhile, the second prince’s supporters were gritting their teeth, beside themselves at the sight of this wondrous catch who had escaped them.

This was the impression Iris left on the court. Everyone waited on tenterhooks for an opportunity to approach her, but none could seem to find one. She was already engaged in conversation with her family.

One person, however, failed to read the room and approached her anyway.

“It’s wonderful to see you again, Lady Iris.”

I was utterly and entirely confused. It was bizarre enough that I had been invited to the Foundation Day celebration in the first place, and it had taken every bit of courage I could muster to even walk through the doors. But much to my surprise, I had been greeted not by the glares I expected but with fascinated and curious stares.

Bewildered, I was suddenly struck with a terrible case of nerves. Not only

that, the queen dowager instantly summoned me to her side and, to my disbelief, declared her open support for me.

Was she the one who invited me? I wondered. If so, then I had accomplished my mission here. I let out a relieved sigh and retreated to a corner of the room where I might spend the rest of my night silently.

Then she appeared before me. Yuri.

And not just her, but a terribly disgruntled Edward by her side, along with Van and Dorssen, all of whom stared at me as if I had grown a second head.

“It’s nice to see you again,” I said with a smile. I hoped it didn’t look too fake.

“It’s been so long since your time at the academy,” said Yuri. “I’m so pleased to see you’re looking well.”

Was she trying to imply something or was this genuine concern? Honestly, I never knew when it came to her. Either way, the least I could do was exchange pleasantries.

“I’m pleased to see you well in turn, Ms. Yuri.”



“I can hardly believe it’s really you, Lady Iris,” Van interjected from Yuri’s side.

Yuri smiled. “See, I told you I never forget a face. Plus, she was with Berne, so it had to be her.”

“She’s just changed so completely—I hardly recognized her.”

I was so shocked to hear them exchange such overt opinions about me right in front of my face that I couldn’t speak. It was the height of rudeness.

“You’re so smart, Yuri.”

“Eh he he... Thank you, Prince Edward.”

Yes, yes. It seemed everything was still sunshine and rainbows with these two. But really, how incredibly inconsiderate of Edward to have this conversation under his ex-fiancée’s nose. Honestly, I expected as much of Yuri, but had Edward always been so witless? I had to wonder. Then I remembered the last thing he’d said to me at the academy and all those doubts flew away.

“By the way, what ever are you doing here today, Lady Iris?” Another unexpected jab from Yuri made my smile crack for a split second.

“What am I doing here?”

Yuri’s gaze flitted away awkwardly. “Well, because you...”

“There’s no reason to ask when you know the answer. Because there is none. You have lost your right to attend high society functions, Iris.” Edward spoke over Yuri as he glared at me.

He really had no justification for all that hostility.

“Lost my right? I—”

“Yuri’s a kind soul. So she was trying to give you a warning,” he continued, interrupting my attempt to defend myself.

Will you listen to me already? I frowned. “A warning?”

Meanwhile, Yuri seemed baffled by Edward’s assertion and blinked at him curiously.

“I’ve come here tonight by invitation of the queen dowager,” I said. “My

attendance has nothing to do with my particular *right*. I merely followed orders as a subject of the kingdom.”

“What? Grandmother invited you?!” Edward seemed stunned. Had he not just seen me speaking with her? “No, there’s no way she would extend an invitation to someone so wicked. If you’re going to lie, at least try to come up with something more believable next time.”

I was just about to retort that this was no way to talk to someone with whom he had once been *engaged*, but Yuri spoke before I could.

“U-um, I—that wasn’t what I meant.”

“Excuse me?” I was so baffled by Yuri’s statement that I momentarily forgot my anger. What *did* she mean, then? She was the one who’d started this!

“What I meant to ask was, are you perhaps here tonight to promote that dress?”

“Promote?”

“Y-yes! I mean, you’re from Armelia, aren’t you? And that’s where the Azuta Corporation is based. So I was thinking maybe someone at the company had asked you to come advertise the dress here or something.”

No one from the Azuta Corporation had to ask me to do anything, because I owned the company. *They must have no idea that I’m the president*, I thought. I remembered then how Sei told me that Edward had made quite the fuss when Yuri applied for membership.

This made me even more certain that they had, in fact, failed to see me speak with the queen dowager.

“I’m not here to promote anything,” I told Yuri. “But I did want to show off our new product, which is the material this dress is made from.”

“Ah, I knew it! It’s beautiful. I want a dress made out of that same fabric. How can I buy it?”

From there, Yuri and I continued our conversation, leaving Edward entirely out of the equation.

“We don’t have enough of the material to sell any fabrics yet, but we’ll begin

manufacturing apparel once we do.”

“Oh, I see. Well, it’s so gorgeous I thought I’d just die to have one of my own. Isn’t there anything you can do to make that happen?”

“I’m very happy to hear you like it so much, but I’m afraid we need more time before we can begin selling. Please understand.”

Not to mention, the country I’m importing the silk from is charging me an arm and a leg. I might have been tempted to make an exception for a valued member, but such a project really would put me in the red when I thought about the import costs. It was going to take a while before we could launch the wide-scale sale of silk dresses. We didn’t even have the stores to sell the fabric itself at a profit. We’d used up everything we had to fashion the dress I was at that moment wearing.

“But...” Yuri frowned.

“Th-that’s right,” Edward said hastily. “Yuri’s going to be part of the royal family, and she’s making a request. It’s your duty to accommodate her!”

“I’m afraid it’s impossible.” Despite my best efforts, I let out a deep sigh. They were being so stubborn with these unreasonable demands. Speaking with them was exhausting.

“Wh-why, you insolent...!” Edward’s face reddened.

Fortunately, most of the surrounding crowd was too absorbed in enjoying the music or their own conversations to pay us any heed. But the ones closest to us did stare, wondering what in the world was going on.

Honestly, how troublesome.

“My, my. What’s the commotion over here?” My mother suddenly appeared from behind me.

Yuri brightened. “Ah, Duchess! It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

My mother ignored Yuri as she would the breeze and came straight over to me. “Are you all right, dear?”

“Yes, I’m fine, Mother. I’m so sorry for the fuss.”

“Duchess Armelia!” Edward addressed my mother with the same tone he’d used on me.

She frowned ever so slightly at the sight of him. “Oh, Your Highness. Why ever are you raising your voice in the middle of a party? What could be the matter?”

“The matter is that you just ignored Yuri. Under certain circumstances, that could be considered akin to treason, you know!”

“Please, Sir. Enough with the jokes. Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the rules of the court?” My mother swept her fan upward, hiding her mouth—as well as a deep sigh just like the one I had let out, perhaps? She spoke clearly, staring down at both Edward and Yuri. “It would be uncouth for a member of the lower class to preemptively address someone of higher status. And if Ms. Yuri here is to be your wife—in fact, *because* she is to be your wife—it is critical that we abide by those rules.”

“But Yuri’s my fiancée.”

“Indeed, so she is. But a fiancée is not a wife. In other words, she is not *yet* part of the royal family. Her social status remains the same as it ever was. What’s more...you never know what might happen before a wedding.” She cast a meaningful glance in my direction.

Ah, right. This jerk had a track record of breaking off engagements. Case in point: me.

“Yes, quite,” Van said, too smugly for my taste. “Yuri isn’t yet married to Prince Edward. However, he *chose* her to be his fiancée. And the queen dowager herself has given them her blessing. This engagement has the full support of the royal family. Unlike his previous *situation*.”

My engagement with Edward had been arranged by my family, not the royal house. Van’s implication was obviously that since Edward had personally chosen Yuri, he wouldn’t cast her off like he had me.

I clenched my hand around my fan. Nothing Van said was incorrect. But how dare he say it to me in public?

“Yuri’s a kind girl,” Dorssen added. “Kindness is a necessary quality for anyone who will stand above others. I’m certain she’ll be a lovely queen.”

As opposed to someone like me, widely blamed for bullying Yuri? Whether that was his intended implication or not, I was so irritated by this point that everything felt like an insult.

“Excuse me, Merellis—Your Grace...” Yuri spoke. “But I’m not sure social status has anything to do with greeting someone. If someone greets you, isn’t it merely common courtesy to return their greeting?”

My mother and I—and every single person around us—turned to stare at Yuri in shock. Well, except for Edward and Yuri’s cronies. They didn’t look shocked at all.

Common courtesy, eh? The world of aristocracy was chock-full of formalities to observe and rules to follow. Doing so wasn’t easy. But in this world, the king sat at the top of a pyramid with every other noble underneath him; etiquette was a vital part of ensuring the stability of that pyramid. Certainly in Japan, it would have been considered terribly rude to ignore anyone who greeted you. But just as there were proper ways to greet someone and return said greeting in Japan, this world had its own rules.

“Ms. Yuri, should you become a member of the royal family, you will be expected to behave in accordance with the court,” my mother said, hiding another sigh behind her fan.

“Those courtly rules you speak of represent an antiquated way of thought,” Edward declared. “And if you assume that way of thinking will always prevail, you’re wrong. Once Yuri becomes queen, she’ll break down those old ideals and bring a breath of fresh air to this kingdom.” He slid an arm around Yuri’s shoulders and squeezed.

Under normal circumstances, I could have ignored such a sentimental display. But not paired with those words. If they had been directed at me? I likely could have brushed it off. But had he just called my mother, the Flower of High Society, *old* and *antiquated*?!

“A breath of fresh air... How very lovely,” I said with a smile on my face. “When Ms. Yuri *eventually* becomes queen, I understand that will be her way of thinking. However, Ms. Yuri is *not yet* the queen. And in order to change long-held traditions, why, she would need the acceptance and approval of everyone

to whom those traditions are precious. You know, those same nobles who, *here and now*, you say cleave to such antiquated ideals. Suffice to say, I think it profoundly unwise to disrespect them.”

My words made Edward’s face turn a purplish shade of red, exposing his anger. “The impudence! Someone such as you does not even belong here! Leave this place at once!”

“Your Highness,” my mother chided. “You cannot simply ignore the wishes of the person who invited Iris here in the first place with your demands.”

“Merellis is right,” said the queen dowager herself as she joined the conversation.

“Grandmother?!”

“Goodness, are you sure you shouldn’t be in your seat, Your Majesty?” my mother asked nonchalantly, in direct contrast to Edward’s shocked reaction.

“Never fear. I’ve seen to most of my pleasantries. More importantly, Iris—come with me. I wish to hear tell of all your recent exploits! Will you be staying here, Merellis?”

“No, I think not.”

“Wonderful. Duke Armelia and Marquis Anderson are over there waiting for you. Go tend to them, would you?”

“Of course.”

“Berne, I hate to leave you alone. Why don’t you go give your father some company, too?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Now that all that was settled, Edward repeated himself. “Grandmother...”

“What *is* it, Edward?” the queen dowager responded coldly. “My, you’re noisome today. Numerous delegates from other countries are attending the celebration tonight, so I expect you to conduct yourself accordingly. But perhaps you need to cool your head. You’ll shame our kingdom if you continue with this kind of behavior.”

With that, she began walking, with me and my family following her. As we left Edward and his companions, I cast a glance in his direction. He sent me the most intense glare I'd ever received.

I was certain he would blame me for all of this.

At any rate, the queen dowager once again took her seat.

The celebration was filled with many prominent faces, all of whom were smiling, yet they nevertheless made for an intimidating crowd. Among the foreign guests in attendance were many people of high social standing who held prestigious posts. Then there were the top military officers of the kingdom, including my grandfather, along with the ladies and gentlemen who held important positions in the court. The fact that they all flocked around the queen dowager proved that she still held incredible influence.

I worried again over whether it had been wise to come, but I still obediently listened to the queen dowager.

"Iris, I'm so sorry for that dreadful situation you were just subjected to."

"Not at all! Your Majesty has no need to apologize for anything."

"No, it was I who invited you, so I am responsible for any poor treatment you endure."

"Poor treatment... I was prepared for him to say such things to me. In fact, I remain surprised anyone has anything kind to say to me at all. Which brings me to ask, Madam, why *did* you invite me here in the first place?"

"Why, because I'm cheering for you. Seeing a woman working as hard as you do is just so wonderful. So, I was very much looking forward to speaking with you tonight."

"Thank you."

"Relatedly, the chocolate treats your company concocts are simply delicious. I've been treating myself to some every day lately!"

"Oh! I had no idea you were a fan of our chocolate. I'm incredibly honored."

"Quite. Honestly, I'd love to go to the shop and pick some out myself, but I'm afraid my position doesn't allow me that sort of freedom..."

“Of course...”

Was there something else going on here? The queen dowager just seemed to be showering me with compliments. But I couldn't let this opportunity pass me by.

“If it would please you, Madam...perhaps I could regularly send you a sampler of our company's catalog?”

“Oh, my! Would you do that?”

“Yes, of course. I will have to return to the duchy soon, though. But with your permission, I can send someone from the company to bring you an array of products to select from.”

“That would be wonderful! Yes, please do that. Oh, look at the two of us, having all the fun! I'm so sorry. Would you like to try some, too?”

The queen dowager noticed some foreign guests looking at us curiously and motioned to a servant, who brought over a box. The box itself was so ornately decorated it almost looked like a treasure chest. But when the servant opened it, I was surprised to see it filled with Azuta Corporation chocolates.

The queen dowager picked one up and happily took a bite. “Please, go ahead!”

The servant passed chocolates out to the nearby guests, and they all sampled one.

“Delicious!”

“Hmm... I've never tasted anything like this.”

“Neither have I... This is so delicious, I can't imagine a soul who wouldn't love it.”

I was certain some of them had never tasted chocolate before. They all had quite a favorable reaction. Although I'm sure a hefty part of that was because the queen dowager herself had recommended them. However, since she had generously given me the opportunity to promote my products, I wasn't going to let that slip past.

“I'm so pleased to hear you like them!” I said to the people who seemed most

surprised. “I heard that in your country, you enjoy refreshing fruits instead of sweets, so I was curious to see if you would like the chocolate.”

“Oh? You know where we’re from, even though we haven’t introduced ourselves yet?”

“Of course! You’re such important guests to Tasmeria. It’s only natural that I be aware of visitors to our wonderful kingdom.” This kind of response was what I had been coached to perform during the short time when I was preparing to marry into the royal family. I had been educated on all our neighboring countries and our relationships with them.

“Hm... Yes, it’s just as you say; in our kingdom, we prefer fresh, subtle flavors.”

“Indeed. Well, those chocolates are just one of the many products we offer. I would love for you to try the other flavors we have to see which one you like the most.”

The foreign guests chuckled at the idea of me using such an occasion to pitch my products, but at the same time, their eyes shone with curiosity.

“Interesting. I’ll have to do that sometime.”

“Yes, quite. I’d love to bring some nice items back home to share.”

Great, they’re loving the idea. I was starting to think that it had been a good idea to come to the celebration after all, at least from a financial standpoint.

After that, I spent some time chatting with the queen dowager and answering questions from and asking questions of the foreign guests. For the most part, I inquired about their culture and tastes, so they answered me readily.

Yes, this had been most advantageous indeed. I could take the information I gathered here back to my company with the goal of eventually exporting our products to these other countries. And now I had intermediaries lined up to begin the process.

After some time, the music changed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to dance, Iris? Pardon me for keeping such a young woman all to myself!” the queen dowager whispered apologetically into

my ear.

“Thank you so much for your kind concern, Madam, but I’m so enjoying chatting with you and the other guests. Not to mention, there’s no one in particular I’d like to dance with...” I lowered my voice with that last sentence so that only she could hear me.

Although I’d been able to more or less repair my image, thanks to the queen dowager’s attention, it was hard to ignore the fact that the second prince’s faction was still glaring daggers at me. In other words, it benefitted me much more to remain at her side than to go find a dancing partner.

“Iris, I’m certain that the moment you step out onto the dance floor, you’ll be inundated with requests! And there are plenty of men here who’d love to dance with you, too.” The queen dowager cast a glance to my side where Berne stood. “Isn’t that right, Berne?”

“That’s right. I’d love to dance with my sister—with your permission, Your Majesty.”

“Did you hear that, Iris? What do you say?”

“Well, then. I’ll take you up on the kind offer.”

That was that. Berne escorted me toward the dance floor.

“Forgive me for taking you away from the queen dowager, Sister.”

“It’s fine. But I’m certain you don’t *actually* want to dance with me.”

“You won’t be able to speak with the other nobles if you stay cooped up over there the whole night. Of course, it’s important to remain in the royal family’s good graces, but your connections with the rest of the nobility are important as well. In fact, Father told me to fetch you because he suspected the queen dowager was probably suggesting you go dance—he thinks she’s worried about that exact thing.”

“Ah, so Father sent you? Then there’s no reason for you to apologize. Perhaps I should be the one to tell you I’m sorry, for taking up your time.”

“Not at all. Still, Sister... Your heart must be made of steel,” Berne said with a sigh.

“That’s a bit rude to say to someone, even if they are your sister.”

“I’d think it about anyone who carries themselves with as much composure as you did in front of all those foreign dignitaries.”

“Oh...” Now that I thought about it, I had certainly been out of my league with that group. They were all incredibly prominent individuals, and much older than me as well. They probably wouldn’t have given a young woman like me a second glance if not for the backing of the queen dowager.

At last, Berne and I arrived at the dance floor.

“It’s been a long time since you and I danced together like this, hasn’t it?”

“It has, Sister.”

And so we began to dance.

“My, how beautiful...” Marquis Gazell Daz Anderson, the general of the kingdom who was hailed as a hero, sighed as he watched his granddaughter Iris dance. “I may be a rugged sort without the least interest in dance, but even I can see how beautifully she moves, Louis.”

The self-professed rugged man had, however, shaved his usually scruffy beard and slicked back his wild hair in honor of Foundation Day. Under normal circumstances, when he stood next to his daughter Merellis, his peers often teased him and said they looked like Beauty and the Beast. But he had cleaned himself up such that it was apparent where Merellis’s good looks had come from. In fact, many young women had been stealing glances at him all night.

“You should tell her that yourself later. I’m sure she’d love to hear it,” said Louis.

“Ha ha ha. Not from an old man like me.”

“You really should think more highly of yourself, Gazell.”

“That goes for Iris as well. Take a look around. Prince Edward is dancing with Ms. Yuri, and Van and Dorssen are terribly popular with the young people—yet all eyes are on our Iris.”

General Gazell was right; until Iris and Berne had arrived on the dance floor, the young guests had been uniformly focused on Prince Edward and his group, just as their parents, the older generation, had been keenly interested in the queen dowager's conversation with Iris.

Now, however, everyone was watching Iris, regardless of age or gender. She sparkled.



“Everyone will want to make her acquaintance now.”

“I agree. But that means she has returned to this cutthroat world.” Louis’s face clouded, his eyes filled with sympathy and concern.

“True. So it’ll be as it was when she attended the academy.”

“I’m sure. But the people she’ll meet now are far more cunning than they were back then.”

“Yes, but you called her to the capital because you believed her capable, did you not?”

“It wasn’t a matter of believing in her. It was necessary in order to ensure she could continue running the duchy and managing her company.”

“Why can’t you just admit it?” Gazell said with a wry smile. “Ah, Iris has retired.”

Just as he said, Iris had left Berne’s side to go fetch a drink. She looked a bit tired after several rounds.

“Wonder who will approach her first?”

“What in the world is Berne thinking? I told him not to leave her side under any circumstances.” Louis sounded slightly irritated.

“Wait, Louis. Look over there...”

Louis followed Gazell’s gaze, his eyes widening at what he saw. “Berne still has his eye on Ms. Yuri...?” he asked, a dangerous glint in his eye.

Meanwhile, Berne had no idea that his father was watching him as Yuri invited him out to the terrace.

“Did you want something?” he asked her.

“Not especially. Can’t I just want to speak with you?”

“I didn’t say that,” Berne responded softly. Yuri smiled and was about to open her mouth, but he beat her to it. “But you’re officially engaged to Prince Edward now. And if you will *eventually* become the queen, you must serve as an

example to the other nobles.”

“So I can’t talk to my friends?”

“Friends, hm? Of course you can. But if people see us conversing alone, they might misunderstand our relationship and twist their version of events until everyone believes it. I have no desire to become involved in a situation that could so easily be misconstrued.” Berne smiled as he said this, but his eyes were dismissive.

“But I’m worried about you,” Yuri pressed. “You’ve been so busy lately that I haven’t seen you at all. You always work so hard that you forget to take care of yourself. So I’m afraid you’re pushing yourself again...”

“I’m not pushing myself at all,” Berne replied, his mind suddenly returning to a memory of his sister—her lights on late into the night as she worked tirelessly, buried under a pile of papers and books as tall as she was. That sight had inspired him.

“Are you sure? I’m just concerned because I know how hard you can be on yourself...”

“You’re something of a dream, aren’t you?”

Yuri gave him a surprised look for a moment, and then a pleased, shy smile spread across her face as she glanced away. That was why she didn’t notice how frosty his gaze had become.

“But I’m a man who lives in reality. So please, Ms. Yuri... Forget about me and live in your own world.” With that, Berne walked away from her.

“Your words had a bit of a sting to them, didn’t they?” Merellis remarked as she walked over to him.

“What are you doing here, Mother?”

“I was taking a break from the party and spotted you with Ms. Yuri. I wanted to see how you reacted to her. Your father was quite concerned, but he can’t slip away as easily as I can.”

“I see. I’m sure it wasn’t terribly interesting,” Berne said with a bitter smile.

“On the contrary. I found it incredibly interesting. Especially the last thing you

said to her, which, translated bluntly, means ‘The two of us live in different worlds, so stop flirting with me.’ Or something to that effect, no?”

“Yes. And I meant what I said, about her being some manner of dream. That wasn’t figurative.”

“Hmm...”

“Dreams make everything softer and kinder. They’re an escape for when life isn’t working in your favor. That’s why I got so lost in her. But dreams are nothing more than an illusion. Fleeting, intangible...not real. That’s how I feel about her words—no, her entire being now.”

Before, Yuri had suggested charity events to help the citizens. Berne was sure they had helped a few individuals, but none of them had actually solved any underlying problems. They were just delaying suffering.

“All you ever ask is why. But fine. The more people who study here and gain knowledge, the more that knowledge will spread among our people. It might take some time, but in ten or twenty years, the Armelian standard of living will surely rise. As governor, I believe it’s necessary to look toward that future.”

That was what Iris had said as she looked over her academy with a smile. Now Berne knew that behind that smile lay the back-breaking work she had put in to make it all happen. Despite the struggles that reality had laid before his sister, she had gritted her teeth and worked to make her dreams *become* reality. Since witnessing her in action, Berne had grown ashamed of how he had run from hardship into his own sweet dreams.

In other words, he had woken up. At the same time, he realized what he had done, and also what he hadn’t.

“I’ve realized I can’t afford to get distracted, so therefore I no longer have time for distractions. I only want to move forward without bringing shame to the Armelia name.”

“My! You’ve become awfully mature, haven’t you?” his mother said with a smile. “But it’s still not enough. You lost your father’s trust once, so I’m looking forward to seeing how you regain it.”

“You’re so strict with me, Mother.”

The duchess responded to that with a smile as well. Berne bid his mother farewell and then went off to look for Iris. It was quite simple to find her, seeing as she was surrounded by a large crowd of people, all around their parents' age. They seemed absolutely enraptured by their conversations with her.

She appeared to be keeping up well, but as soon as Berne arrived by her side, she let out a sigh of relief. "Thank you so much, everyone. But I must excuse myself now that Berne is back." He took the hint and escorted her out of the room.

The day after the Foundation Day celebration, the queen dowager summoned Alfred, the first prince, to the detached palace to speak with her. There, she regaled him with the story of the fete he had not attended.

"Is that how it went?" he asked.

"Yes, but it would have been far more amusing if Ellia and her family swept in and made a scene. But she was so fixated on trying to flaunt her position to the crowd that she entirely failed to notice! Marquis Marea did, mind you, but he knew better than to attempt to insert himself into the exchange, let alone participate." The queen dowager sounded dissatisfied.

In contrast, Prince Albert nodded with approval. "Avarice will do him no favors. Of course, we can't let our foreign guests witness our kingdom's mess. Nevertheless, you managed to slow the momentum of the second prince's faction and kept the neutral faction in check. I would expect nothing less from you, Grandmother."

"I didn't have to lift a finger. Edward sabotaged himself, I suppose you could say. Has that child always been so thoughtless?"

"I couldn't say. He's always been headstrong. I think the best way to describe him at present would be to say he's a runaway horse with no rider," Prince Alfred mused, to which the queen dowager nodded.

"And the person who set the horse loose from the stable is that baron's daughter, no? Knowing you, I'm sure you've looked into her background."

"Yes, of course. Rudy?"

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Rudy, who stood at alert next to the prince, took a step forward. “Ms. Yuri is the illegitimate child of the Baron Neuer and a servant who worked at the palace. The servant resigned her position here and joined House Neuer. However, she left while still pregnant with Ms. Yuri. The baron searched for the woman and girl for more than a decade and finally found them shortly before Ms. Yuri joined the academy.”

“If the baron searched for so long, they must have been quite important to him,” said the queen dowager.

By “important,” she implied how dearly the baron must have loved both Yuri and her mother. In other words, she had grasped the baron’s weakness. Sadly, the world of aristocracy was not the world of fairy tales, and no one could survive with the power of love alone.

“My apologies, but that is the extent of my findings for now,” said Rudy. “I’m still looking into the baron’s situation.”

“I see. Please continue your investigation, and don’t overlook anything, no matter how small—not even the most inconsequential detail.”

“Yes, Madam,” Rudy answered with a smart bow.

The queen dowager glanced at Prince Alfred. “It’s certainly more convenient for you if Prince Edward is running about every which way, granted.”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you mean, Grandmother.”

The queen dowager sighed inwardly. Her grandson always kept his cards so close to his chest. “I’m sure a number of individuals in the second prince’s faction were displeased with the night’s events. Just as there were a number happy to see the riderless horse and consider that they might take those loose reins for themselves. Either way, they’ll make themselves more visible and their faction will suffer, especially as Edward carries on. Hence, it’s all quite favorable for you.”

“I can’t deny that he makes good bait,” Prince Alfred answered with a wry smile.

The queen dowager thought he sounded genuine enough.

Too few noble houses still took pride in standing above and protecting the citizens. Instead, they obsessed over their prestige and lived as extravagantly as possible. They took pride in their status for their own self-satisfaction and vied for power and influence purely for the sake of their selfish pursuits. To these people, the royal family was not something to revere but a resource to manipulate. Therefore, in their eyes, Prince Edward was the ideal candidate for the throne. They saw him as easy to control; with him in power, they would be able to do as they pleased behind the scenes.

Now, surely even more people would join the second prince's faction with that goal in mind. Even more so if Prince Alfred refused to come forward as an alternative candidate. He had not been seen in public for ten years, after all, not since he was a child. He had attended the royal academy in secret, concealing his true name and lineage. In all likelihood, very few people remembered him. Thus it was no wonder that certain people threw their support behind the easily manipulated Prince Edward instead of the reclusive first prince.

But now there was at last a chance to rid the kingdom of all these people, all at once. More chances would doubtlessly arise if Prince Edward continued on as he had at the Foundation Day celebration.

"So? Have you decided your next move?"

Prince Alfred remained silent, with nothing but a smile on his face. Once again, the queen dowager couldn't help but chuckle to herself. He was her own flesh and blood, yet he remained inscrutable.

"Well, no matter," she said. "Regardless of what you decide, I've already agreed to it. Whatever the outcome, all that boy must do is continue playing the fool."

She had long since decided she couldn't expect anything else from Prince Edward so long as Yuri remained an influence upon him. In all honesty, she had once considered exercising her own power to pull his strings, but she had decided that too risky an investment.

Conversely, though she never knew Alfred's true thoughts, she had every confidence that he would never endanger the kingdom's future. Even if he somehow failed to live up to her expectations, he was a far better choice than

Edward.

“By the by, I invited Iris to the celebration,” she said. “She’s grown into quite the beautiful young lady, hasn’t she?”

Prince Alfred’s expression tightened slightly when she mentioned the girl’s name, but he swiftly regained his usual mask. “Why *did* you go to the trouble of inviting her, Grandmother?”

The queen dowager heard the slightest edge in his voice. That pleased her. It went to show how much he cared for the girl. “I adore a hardworking girl. It’s only natural, isn’t it, that I should want to see her?”

Iris was blessed with Merellis’s beauty and Louis’s noble aura. If the people compared Merellis to a bouquet of roses, they could liken Iris’s pure, refined beauty to that of a lily. *Two different types, yet I prefer the latter*, the queen dowager thought with a satisfied smile, reflecting on Iris’s exquisite appearance at the celebration.

“It’s only to her advantage, no? Now she’s forged valuable connections to influential people from other kingdoms. And Merry says she’s already received several invitations to visit new acquaintances within the capital as well.”

“Anyone of intelligence would desire her acquaintance.”

“I’m sure. What with her wealth, skills, beauty, and lineage...she makes for an incredibly attractive prospect. Don’t you think so, Alfred?”

“Yes,” he answered plainly.

The queen dowager frowned. She wished he had at least shown a reaction on his face. She studied him keenly, making no attempt to hide that she was doing so. Once he noticed her gaze, his wry smile deepened.

“It seems you’d like to say something to me.”

“No, not particularly.” There’s no use trying to loosen those lips. So she changed the subject, choosing to be content with the slight reaction she had provoked. “Incidentally, Alfred, I was wondering if you’d tell me your thoughts on the duchy of Armelia.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why, the state of their government and general reorganization, of course. What else could I mean?”

“To sum it up in one word, I would probably say it’s intriguing. The acting governor aggressively instated a variety of new policies. If I were to speak as a member of the royal family, my main points of interest would be the duchy’s capacity for growth and its military power. I wouldn’t be surprised if, in a hundred years, the duchy of Armelia grew more materially powerful than the rest of the kingdom combined.”

“I thought you would say as much. In most cases, I’d disapprove of one house acquiring so much power. But if the kingdom wishes to progress, then its domains must also, and we cannot hamper the rate of that progression.”

“So you say, but I know you have no interest in interfering with that family’s affairs. You’ve proven as much by neglecting to curtail the duchy’s private soldiers—they’re at least as skilled as the royal knights.”

“Are you in any position to criticize? I know you’ve secretly been doing everything in your power to ease Iris’s work.”

At this, yet another wry smile appeared on the prince’s face.

“So long as no one involved with their house harbors any ulterior motives, it seems silly to be suspicious of them,” the queen dowager concluded.

“Especially as no other noble family works so diligently for the kingdom and our citizens. To wit, I’d be more concerned that they would take offense at our meddling.”

Not even the royal family would escape unscathed if they made enemies of House Armelia. Furthermore, if they did somehow lessen Armelia’s influence, it would only be divided among the other houses. It was more convenient, in the end, to keep that power with a family they trusted.

After that, the queen dowager and the prince talked business for a time. Prince Alfred had been hard at work cleaning up Prince Edward’s messes during the king’s absence—with help from the prime minister. The queen dowager had given them her full support in these endeavors.

Once they had covered every issue at hand, the prince bowed and excused

himself. “Well, Grandmother, I should be going now.”

At last, he left alongside Rudy.

Chapter 7:

The Duke's Daughter, Busy in the Capital

“THAT’S AN AWFUL LOT of invitations.”

After the celebration, I took the day off to relax at home with some tea. I felt more mentally than physically exhausted, to be honest. Nevertheless, I was earnestly trying to take it easy while I chatted with Mother, at which point the butler glided in carrying yet another stack of letters.

“Lord Monroe and Lord Rudolph are writing to me?” Mother asked. “Please, they’re Ellia’s sycophants. As if I’d grace their doorsteps.” That biting dismissal was just so like my mother.

“They’ve also sent invitations for your daughter, Your Grace.”

“Even more ridiculous! Although I see why they’re so desperate to connect with Iris after the celebration. Do you wish to see them, dear?”

“No. Not even a tiny bit.”

Me, have tea with people who supported the second prince’s ascension? There was nothing I wanted to do less. Who knew what kind of trap I would be walking into? Moreover, at this

point, there was absolutely nothing to gain in developing a relationship with any of them.

“I thought as much,” Mother said with a sigh as she sipped her tea. “But is there anyone you *do* wish to visit?”

“Yes. House Dungle.”

“The marquis? Ah, that’s right—I quite forgot his daughter was your classmate.”

“That’s right. We were fairly close at the academy.” I was wondering how Mimosa was doing. We’d exchanged a few letters after I left, but I hadn’t seen her in nearly two years.

“Then it’s decided. Does anyone else catch your fancy?”

“Hm... Who do you think I ought to call on, Mother?”

To be honest, I just wanted to return to Armelia, but I’d come all the way to the capital, so I thought I had better make the most of it. Attending a few tea parties would let me get my finger on the pulse of high society’s interests, and it would also strengthen my connections. I had no shortage of invitations, even from those in the second prince’s faction.

Still, I couldn’t be absent from the duchy for too long, so it would be impossible to accept all of them. As such, it was critical to choose my visits with utmost care. I had so little time, so I had to be efficient about where I spent it. Thus I asked my mother’s advice, since she knew far more about the dynamics of high society than I did.

“Perhaps you should call on Baron Messi? And Count Dranbaldt, as well.”

“Count Dranbaldt? Ah, that’s right—you’re good friends with his wife, aren’t you?” If I remembered correctly, my mother often visited the Dranbaldt mansion.

“Very. Not only is she wonderfully stylish, but her conversation never fails to amuse.”

“I’ll take your word for it, Mother.”

“Please do. Keep in mind that the Dranbaldts have thus far maintained neutrality, so most of the attendees at their tea parties will be in the same camp. It would be an excellent opportunity for you to learn more about the conflict between the political factions here in the capital.”

As always, Mother was right. As such, I decided to accept the Dranbaldts’ invitation as well.

“Wonderful. If you’re going there, I’d like to accompany you.”

“Yes, please! Now, what about Baron Messi?”

“Baron Messi fought with your grandfather back in the Tweil War. He was awarded his title in honor of his military exploits, but as his domain borders Tweil and therefore needs constant protection, he rarely travels outside of it.”

“Baron Messi... Ah, you mean Lord Marvelas Messi? I remember Grandfather telling me of him. They were best friends, right?”

“Yes, the very best. He was a highly skilled lieutenant—often called your grandfather’s right-hand man, in fact. You know of how their unit fought during the war, yes?”

“Yes, of course.”

At the time, Tasmeria had not been favored to win, but my grandfather had turned the tide and at last brought victory for our kingdom. Therefore, he had been rewarded with the title of general and was still adored by soldiers and knights alike. I remembered once trying to ask him to tell me all about it a long time ago. He had grown shy and clammed up.

“Mm. It’s in the history books, but a number of details were excluded. Still, Lord Messi was granted his title and lands on account of his tremendous service.”

“I see... It does sound like a good idea to meet someone like that.” It sounded like a rare opportunity that I couldn’t let slip past.

“Indeed. Not to mention, Lord Messi is part of the first prince’s faction, so naturally other like-minded people gather at his house.”

“That makes me want to meet him all the more.”

“Precisely. If Lord Monroe has the time to throw these special events, he would do well to return to his domain to protect his borders like the baron!”

“Yes...”

I mentally studied a map of Tasmeria as I listened to my mother. I recalled that Count Monroe and Baron Messi’s domains bordered each other on the northern edge of our kingdom, right next to Tveil. I had to imagine these had been the primary battlegrounds during the war. Both domains primarily produced grains, and to my recollection, the war had started when Tveil sought to take these breadbaskets. Tveil was a barren land while our climate was more or less an eternal spring. That weather, coupled with our fertile fields, made it all too easy for us to grow all manner of crops, hence Tveil’s avarice and aggression.

Furthermore, Count Monroe's domain was farthest north in our kingdom, so it experienced all four seasons and could therefore grow different crops in each season.

"Has Lord Monroe really left his domain unattended for so long?"

"Indeed, he has. In a normal year, he leaves his home right before the start of the social season and stays in the capital for the entirety of it. He spends his time going to parties and holding many of his own as well."

"I see..."

That made me a little nervous, considering the location of his domain. Tasmeria and Tweil had agreed to a cease-fire, but there was no peace treaty. However, my duchy couldn't do anything about it, so it was a somewhat pointless worry on my part. I still needed to keep it in mind.

"At any rate, since you don't have much time, those should be enough."

"Yes, I'll pay a visit to Lord Messi, Lord Dranbaldt, and the Dungleys."

"All right. We'll go ahead and respond right away. Which is the soonest?"

"The Dungleys, which is the day after tomorrow. However, it is a personal invitation and not a business affair," the butler responded.

"I see. Very well then, Iris. We shall begin getting ready tomorrow."

"Yes, Mother."

How long had it been since we had made rounds on the social circuit? Although this time, we had only three stops. The first would be to the Dungleys, and since it was a personal call, there was no need for me to be nervous. Then again, I hadn't seen Mimosa in so long, so I had to admit I was feeling incredibly anxious.

After the Dungleys' butler let me in, he showed me to the parlor.

"It's so lovely to see you again, Lady Iris." Mimosa was already sitting there waiting for me.

"Thank you so much for inviting me today," I responded as I took a seat.

Mimosa motioned for all the servants to leave the room except for Tanya.

“Enough with the formalities. Iris, it really *has* been ages since I last saw you! I’m so glad to see you’re looking so well.” The stiff atmosphere immediately dissolved, and Mimosa became the old friend I’d known for so long.

Mimosa Dungleigh had been my classmate back at the academy and my best friend. She was a lovely girl with large, sweet eyes and an adorable face. Since I had sharper features, we would have made the ideal woman if you combined the two of us.

“I’m sorry I worried you, Mimosa...”

“You did! I couldn’t believe it. There I was, home sick with a cold, and I heard you’d gotten expelled! How many times did I tell you to be careful of those people?”

She really had. Over and over again. She’d told me to stay away from Yuri and not to get involved with her. And yet when I’d seen Yuri approach Edward and flirt with him, I’d taken a stand and suffered the consequences.

“I regret it. Trust me, back then I had no idea they were planning such a thing.”

“Too true. And normally those boys never would have, but everything changed when they got involved with her.”

“You noticed it, Mimosa?”

“You were too head over heels for Prince Edward to see! Iris, to be honest with you, I’m afraid of her.”

“Afraid?” I was about to laugh, but the look on Mimosa’s face was so serious that the laughter died in my throat.

When I saw Yuri at parties, she possessed a childlike naiveté. All I’d thought at the time was that she was just some silly girl.

“It’s difficult to tell what she’s really thinking. She acts like some innocent little thing, but I truly feel as if there’s something else just underneath the surface... Before the prince and his friends met her, they were raised to understand how they ought to comport themselves—and they knew they held

positions that would make people want to take advantage of them, so they knew they should be especially cautious of new people. Yet they all fell for her so easily, and now they do everything she says. And she's so perfect in her role that none of them have realized she's playing a part... That's my gut feeling, anyway. Anyone who shows such audacity *must* have some kind of ulterior motive."

"Are you sure you aren't reading too much into this? She's condemned herself quite a bit with her own words and actions."

At this rate, if Yuri kept up her present behavior, she would be the one to suffer. From a social standpoint, at least. At the same time, a part of me couldn't fully brush off Mimosa's concerns. For one, it was odd, wasn't it, that Mimosa had been the only person at the academy to express her misgivings about Yuri? And for another... A second thought popped into my head, but it was so outrageous that I pushed it to the back of my mind for the time being.

"Maybe you're right," I said. "Let's change the subject."

Mimosa didn't seem convinced, but she also seemed at a loss for what else she could say to change my mind, so she reluctantly agreed.

"Do tell me how you're doing lately, Iris." She smiled warmly, like she'd flipped a switch on her feelings. Mimosa was so...how could I put it? Feminine, yes, but she also had a wonderfully maternal energy.

"Well, there's not much else to say besides what I told you in my letters," I said. "I'm running my business and am knee-deep in managing the duchy. That's about it."

"Yes, but I want to hear the details! I mean, it's wondrous. You have an enormous shop in the capital, and the most popular cafés carry Azuta Corporation products, too. My mother and I both adore the beauty line—and the chocolates as well!"

"Aw, thank you."

"And you look even more beautiful than before. Did something *nice* happen?" Mimosa had a sly look in her eyes as she grinned at me, making me a bit flustered.

“N-nothing in particular. You know I don’t have time for that. How about you, Mimosa? Anything *nice* happening with you?”

“Not a thing. Since I wasn’t betrothed to anyone, the plan for after graduation was always that I would stay behind in the capital and begin my domestic training until I found a husband. But it’s not as though I’m going to find a suitable match so quickly, especially in the current climate. So I’ve been a bit bored.”

“Ah, I see...” That all made sense, especially the last bit. Engagements tied families together. But now the political infighting meant it was difficult to make permanent alliances when greater loyalties might be hidden or prone to change.

“It’s fine, though. I honestly can’t even picture myself getting married right now. Plus, this is a good chance for me to improve myself.”

Under normal circumstances, I was sure that Mimosa would have been drowning in proposals, so my heart ached a bit for her. I was sure a number of girls from as yet neutral families were experiencing the same difficulties.

I was about to take a bite of the provided treats after a sip of tea when my hands froze. Alongside the scones and sandwiches were chocolates imprinted with a familiar lily.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Iris—those are from your shop. Like I said, I really do adore those chocolates.”

“There’s no need to apologize. I’m thrilled that you like them so much. I was actually planning on visiting our boutique here in the capital. Would you like to come with me?”

“The Azuta Corporation boutique?” Mimosa’s eyes sparkled.

“It’s a little tough having so much going on at the moment, but I won’t be staying in the capital long, so I thought I might as well check in with all our shops while I’m here. Of course, since it’s an official visit, I won’t be going with many people—so if security is a concern for you, I understand.”

I couldn’t bring a whole crowd with me as it would be a business call. But Mimosa’s family might object to her going anywhere without sufficient guards,

being the daughter of a noble house and all.

“How many guards will you bring?”

“Hm, I think probably two. I’ll have Lyle and Dida with me—and Tanya, of course.”

“Oh, I think my father will be fine with me joining you if we go with *them*.”

“He trusts them that much, does he?”

“Of course. He considers Lyle and Dida the most skilled guards in the entire kingdom. He has *utmost* trust in them.”

“I see. Well, if you get your father’s permission, go ahead and send me a letter.”

“Of course. When would you need to know by?”

“Well, I hate to rush you, but within the week, if you please.”

“Excellent.”

After that, we chatted about our days at school, trends within the capital, and all sorts of things until the sun went down. We had so much fun that the time really did fly by. If Tanya hadn’t said, “My lady, I think it’s time we should be going...” I probably would have stayed there all night.

“What were you about to say to Lady Mimosa, my lady?” Tanya suddenly asked me in the carriage on the way home. I shifted my absent gaze from the scenery over to her face.

“When?”

“When you talked about Ms. Yuri. Pardon me for saying so, but it seemed like you were about to say something and then changed your mind.”

“You surprise me, Tanya. How observant of you.”

“It’s a handmaid’s job to notice everything about her mistress,” she answered promptly.

She really was impressive; I’d done my very best not to let my thoughts show

on my face.

“I have a feeling you don’t really think Lady Mimosa is reading too much into things, my lady.”

“You’re right. But...the thought I had was truly preposterous.” I had nothing to base it on. In fact, it was so far removed from reality that I couldn’t even say the words out loud.

“May I ask you what it is, if you don’t mind?”

But perhaps now I could say it. I knew Tanya wouldn’t dare tell a soul. Also, talking it out might enable me to put my thoughts in order.

“Remember what I said to Mimosa? About Yuri condemning herself with her actions?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Well, first of all, those charity events. She was criticized for forging ahead with the food drive with the church despite objections from the nobles and ministers, but the citizens viewed it favorably. They thought she was only thinking of them.”

Based on what my grandfather had told me, the kingdom would not be able to continue those charity events for long. We simply didn’t have the stockpiles. Moreover, we carried a good deal of leftover debt from the war, so instead of lavish spending on charities, we would be better served by tightening our purse strings for the health of our future. At the very least, in my opinion, that money could have been more productively spent.

The problem here was that the citizens knew nothing about the kingdom’s financial state. They had no reason to. And since none of them understood the pressures constraining the kingdom’s finances, once we inevitably had to raise taxes to compensate for Yuri’s overspending, their attitude toward the government would worsen. But their opinion of Prince Edward wouldn’t necessarily change.

“Based on this, we can say that Yuri’s objective was to get the people on her side,” I said. “And the nobles, too.”

“With the charities?” asked Tanya.

“No. With her actions at the Foundation Day celebration.”

“From what I heard, her behavior encouraged some people to withdraw their support from the second prince.”

“Yes, I think that’s true for the most part. But don’t you think it was awfully convenient?”

“Convenient?”

“Yes. Let’s say I not only wanted to maintain the power I already had; I wanted to expand it and gain even more. In that case, it would be much smarter for me to throw in with the second prince, a known quantity, than the first prince, who is shrouded in mystery. Moreover, the first prince hasn’t been seen in public for over ten years—who knows what kind of person he is or what philosophies he may have? Meanwhile, all Yuri has to do is flatter and build up Prince Edward, and everything goes her way.”

“You mean he’s easy for her to manipulate?”

“To put it plainly, yes. And perhaps the reason she conducts herself with such audacity in public is to demonstrate his pliability to the nobles.”

“I see...”

“Again, I have no proof of this. Perhaps I’m the one reading too much into it.”

Yes, I was beginning to think that was the case. Why would Yuri go to such lengths to do such a thing? If all she wanted was to make Edward king, she could be so much more direct about it. Why go to all the trouble of filling his head with lovey-dovey nonsense; making the royal family seem vulnerable, thus calling over the pack of hyenas (also known as the nobility); and deceiving the citizens with charity scams, thereby creating strife inside the kingdom? Why would she ever choose that strategy over a more straightforward method?

“But I still think you should be cautious of her, my lady. Just in case.”

“Yes, I agree. From now on, I’m going to be extremely careful when I conduct business in the capital *and* when I interact with the royal family. Honestly, I’m quite anxious that the king has fallen ill, now of all times.”

I had always planned on establishing branches of the Azuta Corporation in each domain rather than focusing too much on the capital anyway. If all went well, we would start exporting to other countries in the near future. Worst-case scenario, I might have to think about pulling the business out of the capital altogether if the situation grew any more chaotic, even if it would hurt my bottom line.

Luckily, I had more business ventures planned that would take place solely inside Armelia. When I'd first spoken with Moneda, we had already decided to cut down on our trade with the capital anyway. Now I would focus on the safety and security of the duchy.

If the strife in the capital grew worse, there was no guarantee there wouldn't be repercussions elsewhere. Luckily, I'd already started some of these discussions, so all I needed to do was iron out more details with Lyle and Dida.

"I'll gather as much information as I can," Tanya promised.

"Thank you, I'd appreciate that."

Once I got home, I retired directly to my room. I had no plans for the following day, so I decided to explore other places in the capital besides those having to do with my company. Maybe I'd take a trip down memory lane and walk by the academy. I was in a nostalgic mood after my meeting with Mimosa. That night, I fell asleep with those thoughts swirling in my head.

The day came for my visit to Count Dranbaldt. Unlike my personal visit to the Dungleys', I wouldn't be the only one calling on the household. I was feeling quite anxious about it.

"You needn't be so fretful, Iris."

My one reassurance was that my mother was coming with me, for which I was endlessly grateful. My next trial would be a solo call on Baron Messi's house, so this tandem visit would help me ease back into the swing of things.

We arrived at Count Dranbaldt's mansion and were greeted by all the servants at the entrance. One of them, a man in a tailcoat, showed us to a lush green garden.

“Welcome, Your Grace, Lady Iris!” A woman who sat at the center of a round table rose to her feet and greeted us. She was a curvy woman with soft, pale blonde hair that gleamed in the sunlight. I could tell she had a kind, cheerful disposition. Count Dranbaldt’s wife, I presumed.

“Thank you ever so much for inviting us today, Lady Dranbaldt. My daughter and I were simply counting down the days until we could come!” My mother was on her best behavior. Even though she was a close friend of the countess, since there were others in attendance, she spoke more formally than she normally would have.

“I’m honored to hear you say so, Madam! Please, have a seat.” The countess gave us a gracious smile and gestured toward some empty chairs. The butler in the tailcoat was already on standby.

“Thank you.”

My mother and I took our seats. The garden was impeccably maintained and overflowing with all manner of green foliage. A pastel green cloth was draped over the table, which only enhanced the radiance of our backdrop. What stood out even more than the splendid vegetation were the dresses worn by the other guests. They all wore pastels—light pinks, yellows, and blues. It seemed the countess had chosen flowers as a theme, because although we were in a garden, there weren’t actually any proper flowers to be seen. Now I understood why she had requested we all wear pastels in her invitation.

“Allow me to introduce you. This is Countess Remedi Caldina.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

I bowed to the woman seated to the left of Countess Dranbaldt. She slowly inclined her head in response.

“And this is Countess Dora Dannas.”

“I’ve been so looking forward to meeting both of you!” The woman seated next to the countess bowed her head as well.

“This is Baroness Serena Miness.”

“It’s an honor to meet you.”

The countess continued introducing us to her guests in this manner. There were so many of them, I wasn't sure I could keep their names and faces straight. If only that had been the end of it, but unfortunately, that was only the beginning of the tea party.

Next, we sampled the food and sipped our tea. It was quite good! But I would've gotten myself in trouble if I couldn't keep up with conversation, so I made sure to listen carefully.

"The dress you wore the other day was absolutely beautiful, Iris. Wherever did you find it?" Countess Dannas asked.

"It was made from fabric we received in a trade with an eastern country. It'll be a while before we have enough material to sell more apparel, though."

"Oh, I see. The fabric was lovely, but the *shape* of the dress was so new and fresh. Who designed it?"

"I hired a tailor in Armelia to make it for me."

"So then, you were the one who designed it?"

"I'm not sure I'd call myself a designer, but I did give them a rough outline of what kind of shape I wanted."

I couldn't tell them I'd chosen the design for comfort over style. Most of the time when I worked, I did so in looser clothes, so I really hadn't felt like wearing a tight, restrictive corset with an enormously heavy skirt. But since I'd been very clear with the designer from the clothier's shop, I had been confident that the dress would turn out to be fairly light. But that had been the extent of my input.

"I see. I'm positive that dress will start the next fashion trend, though. Don't you think, Lady Remidi?"

"Yes, quite. It was the talk of the party. I'm sure the capital's tailors are already inundated with requests."

Countess Caldina's assertion puzzled me. Was that true? Could this be an opportunity for Armelia's tailors, then? I wondered this to myself as someone else changed the subject. The topic had turned to the latest fads and the news from everyone's households. The conversation especially centered around the

hostess, Countess Dranbaldt, and my mother.

However, the countess proved a skilled hostess who included everyone in the conversation and never let the attention linger on herself for too long. She set a relaxed, comfortable mood. My mother, meanwhile, helped keep that mood sufficiently bright while still respecting the hostess's role and never overstepping her boundaries.

"By the way, I've heard rumors that House Monroe has enjoyed a recent increase in prosperity. Does anyone know what their new ventures might be?" Countess Caldina asked.

My ears perked up at this.

"That reminds me," she went on, "the Monroes have been hosting so *many* parties as of late. At one, the countess will wear a striking diamond necklace, then at the next, she'll have an even larger emerald necklace—with matching earrings! When the jeweler visited my house, I asked him about it, and he told me Count Monroe has been commissioning an incredible number of pieces. I also hear he's been frequenting the Azuta Corporation's boutique."

Everyone turned their eyes to me. I had no choice but to answer. "I'm largely involved in the management of the corporation, and my staff takes care of our clients, so I can't speak to that... But that does sound amazing."

I really only looked at the overall sales. I let Sei and my other staff manage our clientele, so honestly I had no idea how much any given household spent on our products. But even if I had, I wouldn't have told them.

Although, if what Countess Caldina said was true, how *had* Count Monroe come into such sudden wealth? Had he always been so blessed? No, it couldn't be so—his domain was still largely known only for its grain production. I certainly hadn't heard of any new businesses on his part.

"Really?" said the countess. "It was the talk of the party the other night."

"I'm so envious. Speaking of jewels, Lady Dora. Where *did* you get the one you wore to Foundation Day? It was gorgeous. I simply couldn't take my eyes off of it," my mother exclaimed, steering the conversation in a new direction. I would've liked to hear more about the Monroes, but perhaps this was a good

stopping point.

Seriously though, my mother truly was remarkable—she was profoundly skilled at feeling out the mood of a party.

“Oh, that was a topaz! The red was just so beautiful, I was immediately drawn to it and begged my husband to get it for me.”

“Answering his wife’s requests is a good way for a man to show he’s a provider,” Countess Dranbaldt declared. “Was Lord Dannas pleased?”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure I agreed with this opinion, but I decided to keep that to myself.

In my past life, I hadn’t been married, and even though I’d been engaged in this world, Prince Edward had never given me a present—if I’d asked him to go shopping with me, he had always acted like it was a tremendous burden. Essentially, he had shown absolutely no interest in me even before Yuri came on the scene.

I think I’d heard somewhere before that the opposite of love was indifference, but now that he hated me for everything that had happened between me and Yuri, perhaps I’d graduated from persona non grata? Or perhaps not.

“No, my husband knows nothing about jewels,” said Countess Dannas.

“Maybe not, but surely once he saw you wearing it, he fell in love with you all over again! Isn’t that right, Lady Merellis?”

“Yes, you’re so lovely and youthful, Lady Dora. I’m sure your husband could hardly contain himself during the party once he laid eyes on you!”

The ladies let out squeals and laughter at my mother’s suggestion. Now the conversation turned to this or that handsome noble, and the ladies who had daughters discussed who they’d love to see them marry. Since I had nothing to contribute to the conversation, I just listened.

I did wonder a bit who my mother would like to see me marry. Although after the whole disaster with the prince, I probably had no prospects to speak of. She certainly didn’t say anything during this conversation, perhaps out of respect

for me.

“What do you think, Iris?”

Countess Caldina’s question snapped me back to reality. Uh-oh. I shouldn’t have spaced out like that. “I’m sorry, my mind was wandering. What was the question?”

“About your future husband. I was wondering what kind of person you would like to marry.”

“Well, as you all know, my engagement was broken. I was just thinking about quietly spending the rest of my days in the duchy.”

My only dreams for the future involved helping less fortunate children. And, well, I was actually quite looking forward to it.

“Surely you jest, Iris! As the daughter of Duke Armelia, as well as the acting governor and owner of a major corporation, you have a *wonderful* resume. Not to mention, the queen dowager is quite fond of you. You could have your pick of whomever you chose!”

“You think so?”

“Yes! If only my house’s status were higher, I would be beyond thrilled to join our families!” Countess Caldina let out a disappointed sigh.

Countess Dranbaldt nodded in agreement. I had to admit I was surprised; I’d had no idea I was seen in that light. Still, I really hadn’t given any thought to the prospect of marriage, let alone who I might wed.

The party continued until the sun was just beginning to set. I’d been nervous at first, but now that it was over, I realized I’d quite enjoyed myself. I was sure that was greatly due to Countess Dranbaldt’s stunning ability to make every guest feel special. I’d never hosted a party before, and I wasn’t sure I’d ever have the occasion to, but if I did, I hoped I’d be even half as gracious as she was. Perhaps I could dip my toe in the water by starting to have small get-togethers like my mother did?

The following day, I planned to visit my shops in the capital. I was very much

looking forward to it, especially since Mimosa had written saying she'd received permission to come.

"My lady, it's almost time to meet Lady Mimosa," Tanya said just as I was wrapping up some paperwork.

"Oh, is it that time already? I'm almost done reading this letter. Just show her in once she gets here, would you?"

"Are you sure?" Tanya asked me with concern. There were a number of confidential documents spread across my desk concerning matters important to the duchy and to the management of my company. That was probably what she was worried about.

"Mimosa's a friend. Don't worry." At any rate, I didn't have any of the truly sensitive documents out on my desk now, and the letter in my hands was from Dean. I had nothing to hide. But even if I had, I knew that Mimosa wouldn't do anything untoward.

Dean had occasionally sent me letters since my arrival in the capital. I doubted he was still in the duchy, as his contract with me was complete. However, he'd lingered in Armelia for a few days after my departure, so his letters were filled with news about the local businesses—and other musings and opinions he wanted to share with me. Reading his thoughts always inspired me with new ideas, so I relished the opportunity.

This time, he suggested setting up a program for the next level of education that would be more akin to a trade school rather than an academic-oriented extension of the topics taught at the elementary school. I did think that sounded like a good idea, but I wasn't convinced we needed to attach such a program to the schools. Our tradesmen already took in apprentices to whom they taught everything they needed to know.

In any case, Dean ended this particular letter with "Don't overwork yourself." It warmed my heart.

"Lady Mimosa has arrived." There was a knock at the door, and Tanya entered with my friend and her two bodyguards.

"Good morning, Mimosa. Sorry I couldn't greet you downstairs."

"It's fine. Oh, my...did something *nice* happen?"

"What do you mean?" I gave her a puzzled look.

"That letter. That dreamy expression on your face. Is it from a suitor?"

"What?!" Mimosa's suggestion left me speechless. Dreamy?! Surely she'd just misinterpreted my face in deep thought. I was pondering the state of the duchy, of course. "Absolutely not! This letter pertains to business back home, that's all."

"Hmm, really? I thought for certain a new love had come into your life."

"Oh, Mimosa. I don't have time for something as frivolous as love."

A sad look crossed her face. "I'm sorry if the way I worded it offended you. But Iris, I really don't want to hear you calling love frivolous."

"Mimosa..."

"Back at the academy, when you were in love with Prince Edward, you were simply glowing. I know it didn't end well, and I know you're terribly busy these days, but speaking as your old friend, I think it's awfully sad that you think you have no need for love. That you look down upon it."

"But..." I had to admit that Mimosa had summed up my opinion on the matter; love just felt so *silly*. I really did think it unnecessary, at least in my life. Perhaps you could say I was no longer a dreamer. But who could blame me after what I'd lived through? I just wasn't the sort of person who could really believe in love, not anymore. Instead, I kept myself eternally occupied, and I'd become content with the way I now lived.

"It's *because* of what happened to you that I want you to find happiness," Mimosa went on. "I'm not telling you to drop everything for love. But at least open yourself up to the possibility of it. Don't deny the person you were back then just because she had a bad experience."

"Mimosa..." Her kind words touched my heart.

"I'm sorry. It's probably not my place to say. Anyway, you look lovely today," she said, swiftly changing the subject. She no doubt wanted to lighten the mood.

“So do you.” I let out a relieved sigh.

Since Mimosa would be going out to town with me today incognito, she wore a more understated outfit than she normally would have. She looked more like a merchant’s daughter than a noble, I supposed you could say. As did I.

“When I’m wearing these clothes, make sure to call me Alice,” I said.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” Mimosa frowned curiously.

“It’s an alias! You can’t just go around flinging my name about town. And you know what they say—feeling is doing. Just going by a different name will make you feel completely different.” Personally, it made me feel like an actress. Being called by another name really got me into the part, so to speak.

“Ooh, I get it. I’ll go by Misha, then!”

“All right then, Misha. Let’s go. Oh, first let me introduce you—you know Tanya, of course, but these are my bodyguards, Lyle and Dida.” I gestured to the two of them, waiting behind me, and they bowed to her. I expected that from Lyle, but Dida was usually so aloof that I was surprised to see him behave.

“It’s nice to meet you... Although I’ve heard so much about both of you that I feel as if I already know you! These are my bodyguards, Harry and Dan.” Her two bodyguards bowed to me in turn.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both.” I greeted them.

Both Harry and Dan looked exactly like what I pictured when I thought of proper bodyguards. They had a stern, sharp edge about them. Luckily, they were dressed in plain clothes so they wouldn’t stand out.

“Well, we don’t have much time. Shall we go?”

First, we intended to visit my café. We would sample the chocolates, snacks, and other desserts that the corporation was selling there. Oh, and the herbal tea, which was another strong seller in the capital.

From the moment we arrived, I could tell things were looking prosperous indeed. There was a long line of people waiting to be seated. I’d made sure to keep the prices affordable, so quite a number of regular townspeople were in the mix.

“Well, shall we get in line?”

“Pardon me, my lady. But shouldn’t you mention your name so you can go inside quickly?” Tanya suggested. Everyone looked at me questioningly, evidently wondering the same thing.

“If I do that, then there’s no point in having come incognito. I want to see how they treat the customers. I’ve planned to spend the whole day doing these visits, so I don’t mind waiting.”

“Please excuse me for speaking out of turn, my lady.”

“So for that reason, Misha, we’ll be walking and standing around waiting a lot today.”

“That sounds fine to me! It’ll just help work up an appetite for later.”

“Wonderful.”

We ended up waiting for quite a while before we got inside. The café was divided up into two spaces, one side for takeout orders and the other for dining in. It occurred to me that we might want to construct a separate building just to handle the takeout. That would cut down on the number of people waiting to come in, and we would still have plenty of space to work with. I was sure some people would want to take leftover food home as well. Or would it be better to invest in a larger space and keep the two operations combined? Or perhaps two entirely separate buildings? Hm, I couldn’t decide.

“Welcome. How many today?” asked the host.

“Seven.”

“I’m so sorry, but none of our tables for large parties are currently available. But if you don’t mind being seated at two different tables...”

We had no choice, so we went with that. The tables were fairly close, so I shared a table with Mimosa, Lyle, and Tanya, while the other had Dida, Harry, and Dan.

At first, Tanya wanted to sit at the other table for more of a balance, but then she decided she didn’t want to be apart from me. Then Mimosa offered to switch places with Harry. I worried that wasn’t a proper positioning for her

bodyguards, but Mimosa assured me she felt safe with Lyle and Dida. Apparently, she *really* trusted my bodyguards.

I chose the cake and Mimosa selected the assorted fruits with chocolate sauce. After we ordered, we could only wait for our food to arrive, so Mimosa and I chatted to pass the time.

The process at the café began when a waitress wrote your order on paper and then sent the order to the kitchen. After your meal, you took the number written on your ticket up to the counter to pay. Each table was assigned a different number, marked with a wooden plate. The top of the plate was stained wood, and the bottom was unvarnished. Once you received your orders, you flipped the plate over to the unvarnished side, though if you wanted to purchase something else, you could flip it back over to the stained side. Obviously, any additional purchases would be added to your check before you went to pay.

The calculations at the counter were difficult to process quickly, so I'd introduced the use of an abacus. I was deeply grateful for my previous life in Japan, where I'd learned to use an abacus in elementary school. At first, the staff was a bit bewildered, but they soon caught on and had grown accustomed to it. They were quite grateful and said their work went much faster now. It made me consider introducing the abacus into the mandatory curriculum for Armelia's elementary school, too.

I absently thought about those things while I chatted with Mimosa, and before long, our orders arrived.

"Ooh, that looks so good!" Mimosa exclaimed happily and dug in.

I'd already sampled all the dishes before, either through the cook here or through Merida, so none of the flavors were new to me. Still, it did feel different eating the dish out at a café instead of at home.

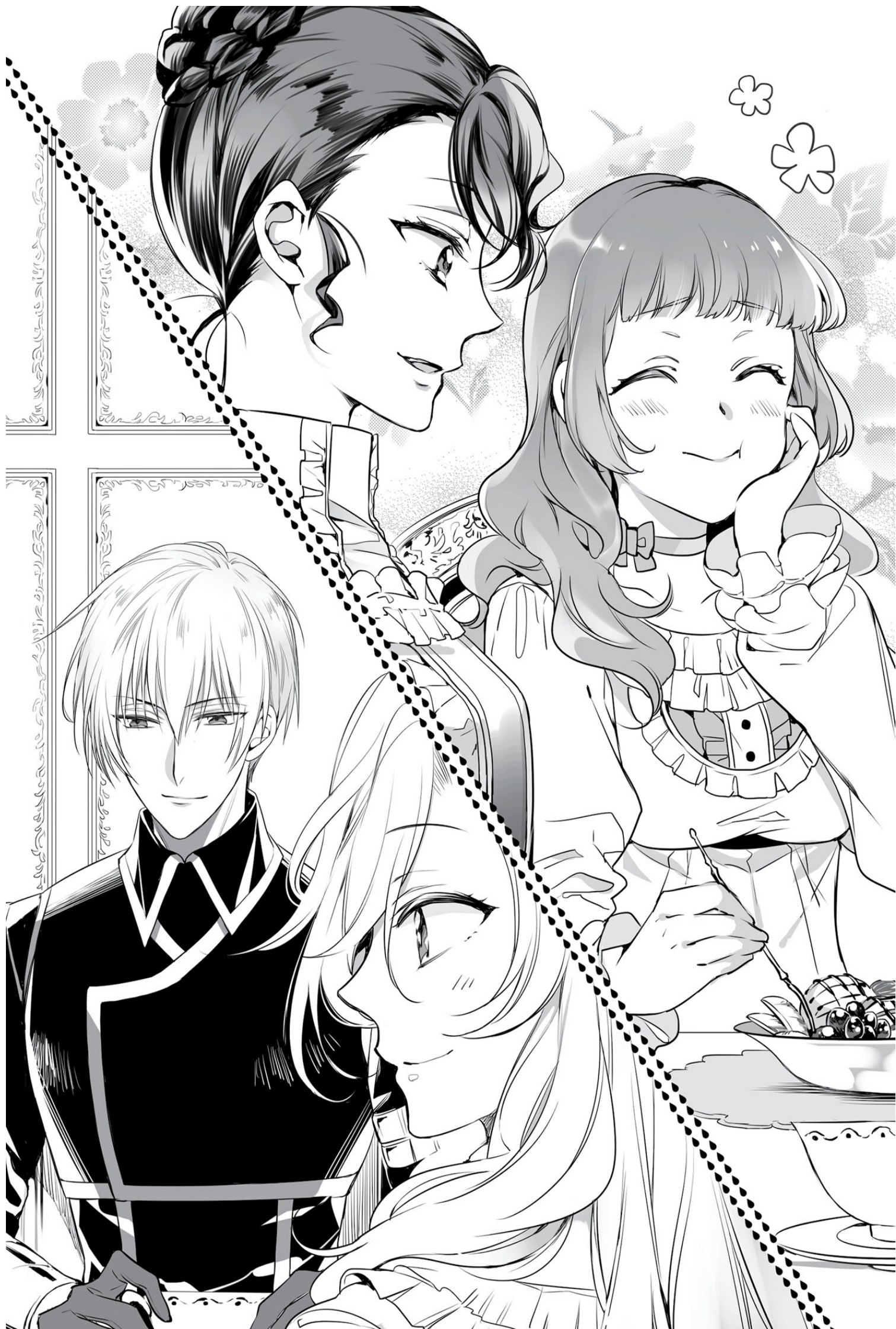
"Mm, it *is* good!" Mimosa nodded with satisfaction. She seemed so happy, you'd think it was her café.

"I'm glad you like it."

Even though the staff was busy, they didn't lack in customer service, and all

our food came exactly as we ordered it.

I was utterly pleased to see them working so hard.



“Why did you want to open a café?” Mimosa asked me. I noticed her plate was already clean.

“I didn’t really have any particular reason. We just happen to have excellent ingredients in Armelia, that’s all.”

“It’s still an accomplishment to turn it into such a success, though.”

“Well, in my case, I’m blessed to be surrounded by talented people.” I had a privileged upbringing and had enjoyed the help of Tanya and the others since childhood. I really was fortunate. “Well, should we get going?”

I’d finished my food while we were talking, so we paid the bill and took our leave.

“Next, let’s stop by the beauty shop. I’d like to take our time getting there, though. Just to get a look around the capital.”

The café and the beauty shop were a bit far from each other, which meant a good deal of walking. I also wanted to investigate any shops that caught my eye on the way and take note of the local price points.

“Hm?” I paused for a moment.

“What is it, Alice?”

“I thought I saw Yuri...” For a second, I could have sworn I saw her, but then I lost her in the crowd. Normally, she was surrounded by such a crowd of people that it was easy to spot her anywhere, but this time, it had been only her and two others.

“Are you sure you didn’t mistake someone else for her? There’s no way she would go out in town by herself.”

“That’s true...”

Maybe it was because Tanya and I had been talking about Yuri before Mimosa showed up. I just couldn’t get that girl out of my brain. I pushed the thought aside as we continued making our way to our next stop.

When we arrived at the beauty shop, we encountered another line to get in, just like at the café. Once we made it to the front, we went inside and perused

the wares. Mimosa kept saying how she wanted this or that, but I persuaded her to wait, since we were going to the members-only boutique next. As only nobles were allowed in that shop, we would have no choice but to reveal both of our identities once we reached it.

Even though each customer had a private room at the boutique, there was still a chance we would run into someone we knew inside the building. Each customer was allowed to bring two attendants to accompany them, so I brought Tanya and Lyle, and Mimosa brought her two bodyguards.

I'd had to place a limit on guests because some nobles had wanted to bring their whole entourage of handmaids and bodyguards, which would have led to a crowded and unpleasant shopping experience. For that reason, I had installed a waiting room near the entrance for the excess members of an entourage. However, Dida didn't want to wait there and said that instead he would stand guard at the entrance and survey the perimeter.

The members-only boutique was located in an area of the capital where nobles liked to own second residences. I had purchased an entire mansion complete with a garden for the establishment, so from the moment we entered the property, it took some time to actually get inside. First, we showed proof of our memberships and then admired the lush greenery of the garden as we walked up to the mansion. At the door, we were greeted by a butler, who once again requested we prove our membership. From there, we were led to separate private rooms to be waited on.

"Welcome, Lady Iris." The butler maintained perfect professional composure when he saw me. His name was Barret, and he had been previously employed as a butler for a merchant family before he began working for me.

"Oh? Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"I knew you were coming to the capital, so I assumed you would visit at some point, my lady."

"Hm, so you must have prepared in advance for my arrival. Now I won't get to see the true state of things!" I said jokingly, to which Barret smirked. He seemed like such a good-natured old man that this smile was especially intimidating.

“I’m afraid not, Lady Iris. The nobility visit this establishment every day, so all things must be perfect at all times. We cannot afford even the slightest slip-up.”

“I see. Well, I can’t wait to see the inside. I’d also love to talk with you for a bit, so please go ahead and show Mimosa to her room.”

“Of course. This way, please, Lady Mimosa.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be waiting over there, Barret. Come find me when you’re done.”

I said farewell to Mimosa and went to a room near the entrance. This particular room was currently empty; the mansion was so large that it had many rooms just like it. The private customer suites were all on the second floor. There, a staff member waited on the client and brought them the products they requested or suggested new ones to try.

The first floor was mainly composed of storage rooms and rest areas for the staff members. If business picked up a bit more, some of those would likely be converted into more customer suites to ensure it never got too crowded.

“Welcome!” said a voice near the entrance. Another customer had arrived.

“I have a guest with me today.”

I opened my door slightly to peek out and saw Barret greeting the guest. Wasn’t that Count Monroe? The man had a stout frame and blond curls that fell over his forehead. I’d have recognized him anywhere, especially as everyone had been talking about him as of late. I glanced to his side to see his guest. I had thought it might be his wife, or one of his children, but I didn’t recognize the person with him. If it had been a woman, I would’ve assumed it was his mistress, but it was a completely ordinary-looking man. But he’d said *guest*, so the fellow couldn’t be a servant or a bodyguard. Who in the world had the count brought?

But before I could find out, the two vanished upstairs.

“Terribly sorry to keep you waiting, Lady Iris.” A knock at the door tore me away from my curiosity as Barret entered the room.

“Not to worry. More importantly, Barret, does Lord Monroe come here

often?”

“Yes, he does. At least once or twice a week.”

“I see.”

That *was* often. I couldn’t deny it was good for our business, of course.

“What kinds of things does he purchase?”

“Mostly sweets. Lately he’s been fond of the eau de cologne. He usually brings his wife or son.”

Sounded pretty normal to me. However, the price points at this members-only boutique were steep, though I supposed it would depend on how much he was purchasing.

“What interests his wife and son?”

“His wife prefers the beauty products, of course. She always asks for recommendations. His son buys chocolate, just as the count does. They’re devoted customers, so every time they visit, it takes quite a while to pack up their carriage.”

That really was devoted. Although how were they using up so much product between just the three of them? I wondered until I remembered the ladies telling me Count Monroe often threw parties. That would explain it. More importantly, where was he getting the money to buy all these luxury goods?

“Lady Iris?” Barret gave me a curious look. I’d fallen silent in thought.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t have anything terribly important to talk to you about. I just wanted to check in to see if you were having any difficulties that I could help solve. I’ve been reading the reports you send to me regularly, of course.” As I was here on business, I’d thought I might as well check in with the staff, after all. Plus, since they were dealing with the nobility, I figured they must have run into some unreasonable requests or something of that nature.

“Is that right? Well, I can’t think of any problems at present. The only thing that really comes to mind is that it would be helpful if we had more staff members.”

“More staff members, I see. Where would you need them?”

“We are especially in need of more cooks. Increasingly often, customers are ordering food to eat on the premises.”

“I see. The only problem there is how long it takes to properly train our cooks, so if we take on new hires, it will be some time to get them up to speed. I’ll see to it immediately, though.”

“Thank you. Also...it would help greatly if we could have more trained employees.”

“Trained how, exactly?”

“Well, people who have experience serving noble families. As you know, our customer base is made up exclusively of the aristocracy. They expect the staff to conduct themselves in a certain manner. Moreover, the reason we are able to keep memberships exclusive is partially because we offer exemplary customer service.”

“I see.”

I’d started the members-only boutique specifically to make it feel like a premier service. But now everyone seemed to be waiting for a membership. Some customers had asked us to hire more staff so we could add more members sooner, but Barret had been firmly opposed to that idea. This request came from a different place.

Hm, so he wanted to hire people who had experience serving nobles... It was rare for those people to leave a family’s service once they started, and even if we did find someone, it would be difficult to hire them right away. We couldn’t have a family with a grudge against House Armelia sending one of their servants into our employ as a spy, so we would have to conduct thorough background checks on any such applicant.

Ah, that reminded me of the idea I’d had about the trade school while I read Dean’s letter. Instead of using the duchy’s money to fund it, I could use profits from the Azuta Corporation to establish a private school to serve a similar purpose. It would benefit the company and would be a good way to expand our employee base.

“Thanks. This information is all very helpful. I won’t be able to solve these

problems immediately, but I'll brainstorm and start working on a plan. Would you show me to my room? I'd like to experience the boutique from a customer's perspective."

"Of course. Right this way."

After that, I enjoyed everything the boutique had to offer and didn't have any particular complaints. The visit went smoothly, and I got ready to leave. However, Mimosa took an awfully long time, so I found myself waiting for her. She had a tremendously satisfied look on her face when she at last emerged, so I suspected she had made some excellent purchases, although I didn't ask her about the specifics.

That was the end of my tour of my ventures in the capital. I was a bit sad to think my stay here was about to come to an end, but at the same time, I was eager to return home.

"Thank you so much for today, Alice."

"Of course. Thank you for accompanying me, Misha."

I returned to the mansion with a mixture of different emotions swirling inside of me.

I was to leave the capital soon, but before that came my visit to Baron Messi's mansion. According to my Mother, the baron was always one of the first nobles to return to his domain toward the end of the social season, and he would often go even before the final soirees. And so he was holding one last dance before his departure. A goodbye party, if you will.

As the members of the first prince's faction tended to be more diligent about managing their domains, they rarely had the opportunity to gather together all at once. Consequently, attendance was high at parties held in the middle of the season like this one.

I had to admit, I wondered if I would be out of place. I did some morning yoga to try to center myself. Mother, who was now an avid yoga fan, wore matching clothes and joined in with me.

“My, Iris. Your face looks so tight. You’ll exhaust yourself before you even leave for the day.”

“Do I look that tense?”

“You do. You stretch out and relax your body, so you should try to relax your face as well. Yes, that’s right.”

After our yoga session, I took a shower and changed clothes. The party wasn’t until later that evening, so I put on a comfortable outfit for now. Since I had time, I looked over the reports Sei and Sebastian had sent me, then quickly sent off instructions for them. This experience had taught me how important it was to be present in the duchy. It took time for their letters to arrive, so the situations they reported might well have changed by the time they reached me. It all made me realize I shouldn’t let my sentimentality get in the way. I needed to go home.

I was looking over more paperwork when there was a knock on the door and Tanya entered. “It’s time to prepare for the party, my lady.”

Already? Time flew by when I focused on work. But I didn’t want to be late, so I put away my papers and started getting ready.

Since the party was at night, I would be wearing a more formal dress for the occasion. I still didn’t like wearing those heavy skirts though, so I chose another lighter, streamlined design. I put on my jewelry while Tanya did up my hair. My dress today was a lapis lazuli blue to complement my eyes. Since my hair was platinum white, diamonds didn’t stand out much against it, so I decided on some deep blue sapphires. That made the silver embroidery on my dress really pop.

It took me quite some time to finish. They always say it takes a woman forever to put herself together, but it was always longer when one of these dresses was involved. First of all, it was impossible to put one on without someone’s help.

At last, I got in the carriage, and we set off for the baron’s house. *Oof, I’m so nervous...*

Since I was already in the district where most of the nobles lived, it didn’t take

very long at all to reach Baron Messi's mansion. Unfortunately, I was so nervous that the trip felt far longer than, it really was. I was shaking with nerves by the time we arrived.

Baron Messi himself greeted me at the door and invited me inside.

"Thank you so much for inviting me tonight."

"Of course! I'm so pleased you could come."

Baron Messi had a strong, sturdy frame, just as you'd expect of someone who had served in the military. Yet his every gesture was so elegant, I couldn't detect a trace of coarseness. He struck me as a perfectly lovely silver-haired old gentleman.

"Grandfather was so disappointed he couldn't make it tonight." He'd wanted to come, but he had a prior engagement. He said he couldn't tell me details, but he was extremely disappointed. That didn't surprise me, since he had such an intimate connection with Baron Messi.

"I'm sorry to see he couldn't make it as well. Please do tell him I hope he can come another time."

"Of course."

Now that I had exchanged pleasantries with the host, I looked around the room.

Goodness. How impressive. That was my first thought. The party was filled with prominent people—nobles who had either earned their land and titles through some sort of meritorious deed or for possessing an exceptional skill, like gifted artistry. I'd heard of many of these individuals through my father's work.

"Lady Iris! It's so wonderful to see you again." I spied Count Sagitalia, the minister of finance. In plain terms, he was my father's subordinate, so I had met him before. If I recalled correctly, the queen dowager had selected him for the position back during her reign. He seemed like a mild-mannered old gentleman now, but word had it that back at the palace, he was quite eccentric and difficult to deal with, although he didn't look it.

“I didn’t know you would be here, Lord Sagitalia!” By which I meant: I was surprised that someone with such an important position would back a prince no one knew anything about.

“I have no business putting my nose in the affairs of the royal family,” the count said. Even though I hadn’t said it plainly, he had gotten the message. He had to be that savvy, as such an influential person. He held the kingdom’s purse strings, after all. His word carried a great deal of weight. “But which one is best for our kingdom? Best for the people? I should think all we ministers are weighing such questions.”

“I see. So you think he’ll be the best one for our kingdom?”

Count Sagitalia’s grin only deepened. “Now then, Lady Iris, your dress is absolutely exquisite.”

“My thanks.”

“Did you also acquire it from a trade with the east?”

“No, I just ordered this one from a clothier in my duchy.”

“Oh, I see! It sounds like Armelia is brimming with gifted people! It has a most enviable position with that sea border. That in and of itself makes your domain prosperous, what with your ability to purify salt and trade with other countries. It seems you’re doing quite well with the latter as well.”

“Y-yes, well. It’s all thanks to our people.”

I was impressed with Count Sagitalia; it was clear he knew all the ins and outs of my domain, even if it wasn’t his own.

“You’re too humble! I’ve heard much of Armelia’s recent success is due to your leadership.”

I merely smiled at his response. Honestly, I was kind of speechless. Although I was flattered, I wasn’t too keen on him pressing me for too many details.

“I’ve heard a great deal about your accomplishments—overhauling the tax system, helping orphans, undertaking measures to strengthen the duchy’s defenses. I have to wonder what your ultimate goal might be.”

In short, he was asking me if I was trading with other countries and doing

business with other domains to gain capital in order to build up Armelia's armed forces. Now that I thought about it, everything I did could very well lead to such a goal. I couldn't fault him for looking at my projects and growing suspicious.

"My ultimate goal... I suppose I haven't laid my finger on that just yet," I answered. Count Sagitalia gave me a puzzled look, so I continued. "I am the acting governor. As such, it's my responsibility to guarantee the safety and well-being of my citizens. That's my goal. Or I suppose you could say, that's the ideal I strive for. The question is, how close can I get to attaining that ideal? Perhaps it's something I will have to continually work for and never achieve? Therefore, I have no 'ultimate goal,' as it were."

"I see. Well, I'm quite impressed. A government for the people... Even though you're so young, you're already committed to your role as a public servant. But I'd caution you to act with care; those with more suspicious hearts might interpret your hard work as an open challenge to the kingdom."

"I thank you for the warning."

Despite my personal feelings, House Armelia had sworn fealty to the royal family. Neither my parents nor my grandfather had any intention of defying them. But my greater responsibility was to keep my people safe. Obviously, part of that meant planning for the possibility of having to protect them *from* the royal family. These were last-resort measures, of course, ones I would never truly want to take. But that choice was always in the back of my head.

Not that I would ever admit as much out loud.

"Prince Alfred speaks highly of you as well," said the count. "He's said he would like to take several policies you've enacted in Armelia and make them the new standard across the kingdom."

"Oh, he has?"

"You don't seem surprised."

"I heard he's in the country. Naturally, I assumed he was in contact with the prominent members of his faction."

The people at this party were a well-known, talented bunch, but there were

definitely some unique characters sprinkled in among them. That meant they would need a strong leader to keep them all in line. It was probably quite difficult to be the lead representative of this group.

“In any case, if the people here support him, then I assume they’ve told him all about Armelia’s status.”

Count Sagitalia wasn’t the only minister in attendance. And if all these ministers were loyal to Prince Alfred, it wasn’t difficult to imagine that he could already carry out a certain amount of his political agenda.

“I’m honored that he thinks so highly of my duchy and the way I’ve been running it. Although, I’m not sure all my policies would be as successful across the kingdom.”

I’d been able to revolutionize so many systems in Armelia to the extent that I had because I was the one in charge. The reach of a governor’s powers in Tasmeria was substantial, to the say the least. If the royal family tried to enforce my policies in every other domain, I had a feeling they would be met with significant resistance from more than one governor. It would take a great deal of time and effort for things to smooth out in that regard.

“I’m confident the prince could succeed. He can change our systems and build the one true kingdom.” Count Sagitalia said this with a smile, as if reading my thoughts.

But the last thing he said nagged at me. The one true kingdom? He had a mischievous grin on his face, like that of a child. Almost like he really could see into my mind.

A governor’s powers in this kingdom were indeed very strong. Generally, each domain operated like its own state, all of them together composing our country, the kingdom of Tasmeria. The governors were given free rein to determine tax rates and other laws within their domains, so long as they didn’t break any national edicts. That was why I had been afforded so much freedom. The only exception was the capital, which fell under direct control of the monarchy.

So when the count said “change our systems,” what systems did he mean? In other words, did the first prince intend to strengthen the power of the

monarchy? That would weaken the governors' powers and return their influence to the royal family. That, in turn, would make it easier for the kingdom to implement whatever new policies they desired.

But it was all too easy to imagine what pushback they would receive for suggesting such a change. Could it really be done? Moreover, why was Count Sagitalia telling me this? Just because I was attending the baron's party didn't mean I was committed to the first prince's faction. All these thoughts led me back to the exchange we'd just had. *"I have to wonder what your ultimate goal might be."*

Was this why he'd asked? What if—and I thought this unlikely, but—what if he was asking me, "What would *you* do if he could successfully change those systems?"

Would I rebel against Prince Alfred and try to declare Armelia's independence? Or would I cede my power to the kingdom? He wasn't trying to find out what my father would do either. Instead, he was asking me, the person actually running Armelia as the acting governor.

"Well, I've never met the prince, so I'm not sure what kind of person he is," I said. "So honestly, I can't say. But if he were successful, and if his changes benefited the citizens, then I can't think of anything that would make me happier."

What I told the count was true—since I'd never met Prince Alfred, I couldn't offer a real opinion on the matter. And I certainly couldn't declare my support—or lack thereof.

"Is that right? Very interesting, indeed. So much so, in fact, that I would love to see you standing by his side one day."

"Oh, my! Surely you jest, my lord. I couldn't possibly be by the prince's side—that would be most improper."

"Pardon me. Perhaps I teased you too much."

After the count and I parted ways, I spoke with several other people and then sat in a chair on the edge of the room to rest. The mansion really was packed with impressive individuals. I'd been so on guard when I spoke with the count

that I was exhausted. I took a sip of my drink and spotted the host of the party, Baron Messi, approaching me.

“What do you think of the party?” he asked.

“I’m enjoying myself very much.” I answered, plastering a smile on my face. If I wasn’t careful, my fatigue would show. “By the way, Lord Messi, may I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“Why *do* you return to your domain so early in the social season? Everyone here—besides the ministers, who work at the palace all the time regardless—stays in the capital until the end. Honestly, that surprised me; I assumed they would be returning home just like you do.”

For a moment, I was worried I was prying, but the baron readily answered me. “It’s because of the duty that was entrusted to me.”

“Your duty?”

“Yes. Has your grandfather told you about the Tweil War?”

“Yes, of course. But nothing more than what’s been written in the textbooks.”

“That’s more than enough. As I’m sure you’ve heard, I fought under your grandfather’s command during the war. And I was awarded my title and lands for my service.” A faraway look rose in the baron’s eyes as he spoke. “But at the end of the day, I’m a military man. A title hasn’t changed that. And the war isn’t over. As someone whose domain is on the kingdom’s border, I simply can’t leave it unattended.”

That was true, but something still didn’t add up for me. Even though both Baron Messi and Count Monroe had land on the borders, it was obvious that the former was far more cautious. And it did seem like he was going home awfully soon. He was required to attend the Foundation Day celebration in an official capacity as a governor, but I heard he had arrived right before the party began, and now he was leaving straight away. The only reasonable explanation I could conceive was that he anticipated war would soon start up again.

“As such, I’m always in a war frame of mind, if you will. I can’t reassure you

and claim there's nothing to worry about. I will only ask you to please be on your guard. I don't expect fighting imminently, but I'm sure Tweil still has its sights on our kingdom."

"Because of our abundant grain and other resources?"

"Yes, and because they still hold a grudge from the war, even after thirty years."

The war.

Armelia was on the opposite side of the kingdom from the border with Tweil, and that border was quite far away. But that didn't mean I could let down my guard. If fighting broke out, every domain would feel the burden.

"Thank you for the warning."

"Pardon me for bringing up such a serious topic during a party. I'll excuse myself now."

"Please don't apologize. It was extremely valuable information. I appreciate it."

I stayed for a little longer, then decided to go home. I'd made several new acquaintances and gained a great deal of information.

After I returned home, I went to bed and slept most soundly. I'd done everything I had planned to do in the capital. Now the only thing left was to pay a visit to my father and finally go home.

"Lady Iris."

I was working in my study the next morning when Tanya came in. "What is it, Tanya?"

"There are two things I need to speak with you about."

"Yes?"

"I've looked into Ms. Yuri since we spoke last. I'm not finished, but I did discover some things I thought you should know right away."

"All right. Go ahead."

“The first is about her upbringing. I thought that her mother had only ever worked for House Neuer, but I was mistaken.”

“Oh? I thought she began a relationship with Baron Neuer while she was in his service? Where did she work before, then?”

“The royal palace.”

“The palace? What did she do?”

“She was a handmaid. I’m not sure how she met the baron, but she went to work for him after she resigned from her post there.”

“That must be where they met, then. Nobles often have occasion to go, I suppose.”

It was certainly possible they had met at the palace. But how in the world had they gone from baron and handmaid to an intimate relationship? I mean, it happened, but I just wasn’t sure these things *just* happened.

“I asked people who knew her at the time, and her coworkers remember her well for her beauty.”

Of course. She was the protagonist’s mother, after all. And since Yuri was the protagonist, naturally, her mother was beautiful as well.

“It’s harder to find information about her life once her mother left the baron. There are traceable accounts from when her mother was still alive, but I’m having trouble finding where Ms. Yuri was and what she did once she was alone.”

“And that seems unusual, since she’s so striking—and she was by herself. Is there something else?”

“While her mother was alive, one of her neighbors recalls saying, ‘It must be tough raising a child all on your own. Is there anyone supporting you?’ and the mother said there was not. But immediately after she passed away, a man appeared claiming to be Ms. Yuri’s blood relative.”

“Was that Baron Neuer?”

“Unclear.”

“Do you have a description of them?”

“I asked the neighbor for one. The man had no characteristics that stood out. The only thing anyone can be certain of was that he was indeed a man.”

So Yuri’s mother had received no support in raising her, yet a man had shown up saying he was her blood relative? Right after the woman passed away? Two possibilities immediately rose to mind.

One, that Yuri’s mother had cut ties with her family for some reason, and because of that reason, she had been unable to depend on them for help—but after she died, the family had decided to take care of Yuri. If that theory was true, then we had to establish where her mother was from.

Two, that Baron Neuer himself had come incognito to take Yuri away with him, or that he had sent someone from his house. That seemed the more likely answer, but if that was true, why hadn’t he publicly acknowledged Yuri until she entered the academy?

Either way, both stories left me with more questions.

“That reminds me: How did Baron Neuer know Yuri was his daughter? There’s no way to prove such a thing, after all.”

“He recognized her from the pendant her mother gave her. But apparently Ms. Yuri is also the spitting image of her late mother.”

Obviously, there was no DNA or paternity testing in this world, so it was no wonder that they would have to rely on circumstantial evidence like that. However, there also wasn’t plastic surgery or any other way to alter one’s face, so people put a lot of weight on physical resemblance.

“And he searched for them for more than a decade? Baron Neuer must have really loved her.”

“That I haven’t been able to confirm. I have some more digging to do. But at present, that’s all I know about the baron’s daughter.”

“I see. Well, thank you, and good luck with the rest of your search. What was the second thing you wanted to tell me?”

“You asked me to look into Lord Monroe.”

“Ah, yes. That.”

After I’d seen Count Monroe at the Azuta Corporation’s members-only boutique, he’d piqued my interest, so I’d asked Tanya to do a bit of an investigation. I told her what I’d heard about him at the tea party and described the man I’d seen him with.

“The man who accompanied Lord Monroe that day is called Divan. He’s staying at Lord Monroe’s mansion as a guest and often goes out to town with him. I checked with the Azuta Corporation, and many employees have confirmed those details.”

“He’s a guest? I wonder where he’s from.”

“Divan is the head of the Ayler Corporation. I looked into it as well, and it’s registered with the merchant guild. Their business mainly deals with food products. However, I couldn’t find out any further details about their clients.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. That kind of thing is usually kept confidential. But if the count’s so close with the head of a corporation, perhaps that’s where all this extra money is coming from?”

“Perhaps.”

I couldn’t think of any other reason. Count Monroe’s domain was largely known for its agriculture, and the Ayler Corporation dealt in food. So perhaps Divan had invested in the count’s land and they’d made some kind of deal? But where were they selling all this food?

“Tanya. I want you to look into this Divan right away. The Ayler Corporation, too. I want to know where they’re selling their goods and for how much.”

“Yes, my lady.”

I had a bad feeling about all this. The situation was changing at a dizzying pace, especially considering what I’d learned at the baron’s party. I had been a bit concerned that I was cooped up in my domain, but now that I’d come to the capital, I realized just how sheltered I’d truly been in Armelia. I still wanted to go home immediately. But I couldn’t simply let this matter go. Something important was going on that I didn’t know about. I was certain of it.

“Why did we have to come, too?” Dida sighed.

Lyle frowned at him. “We had to, Dida. Master Gazell ordered us.”

“Yeah, but we have nothing to do with today’s training.”

They were observing a joint training session between the military and the royal knights. As Dida said, it had absolutely nothing to do with them, but their master, General Gazell, had made them come.

At first, they had declined. Iris was attending a party at Baron Messi’s mansion and they intended to accompany her as her bodyguards. However, they had been overruled by Iris, Lady Merellis, *and* Lord Louis. Lyle and Dida relented when Iris agreed to bring guards who had been trained not only by themselves but by General Gazell. Also, if something did break bad, she would have Tanya with her.

What *was* Tanya up to these days? Lately, it seemed like Dida wasn’t the only one wondering.

Putting that aside, he sincerely wished he could have been with Iris at a party in her fancy dress rather than hanging around with this gang of sweaty men.

“We might not be involved, but it’s to our advantage to know the strength of the soldiers and the knights. Don’t waste this opportunity.”

“That’s all well and good, but I don’t get why he had to call us here now, of all times. We’re not the only ones who don’t like it.”

This training had been designed to strengthen the bonds between the two groups, for at present, they didn’t see eye to eye. The men of the military thought the royal knights were a bunch of spoiled brats who had never seen real battle, while the knights thought the soldiers were a bunch of unrefined brutes. Each group looked down upon the other. Lyle and Dida didn’t much care for either.

In any case, that was why the two groups occasionally held these joint training exercises. Both the soldiers and the knights idolized General Gazell, and they came running any time he summoned them. The general had wanted to

attend his old friend Baron Messi's party, but he couldn't neglect this opportunity to mend the frayed relationship between the two branches of the armed forces and so had regretfully declined his invitation.

Dida heaved an inward sigh, lamenting the bad luck that had led to him and Lyle getting wrapped up in it, too.

The knights and soldiers were already gathered on the training field located on the palace grounds. General Gazell was nowhere to be seen. As Dida and Lyle belonged to neither the military nor the knight order, they were regarded with a good deal of suspicion.

"Oho, there you are!"

At last, General Gazell appeared behind them. The instant he did, everyone straightened and focused their attention on him.

"General Gazell! Pardon me, but who are they?" one knight asked.

"My apprentices. They happened to be visiting the capital, so I invited them over."

"General Gazell's apprentices..."

Now the gathered men studied Lyle and Dida with a new light in their eyes. Was that the light of challenge? No, simple evaluation. It only went to show just how much these men admired the general. Most had done some manner of training drills with him, but very few had taken any kind of private lessons from the general himself. Small wonder they looked at Lyle and Dida with such interest.

"Shall we begin, Knight Commander?"

"Yes. We're ready, General Gazell."

This was Doruna Kataberia, the knight commander of the royal guard. The instant Lyle and Dida saw him, their eyes flashed. So that was Dorssen's father.

Neither of them made a move, however; they only observed the exchange between the general and the knight commander with their own renewed interest.

“Phwaaah...” Dida let out a huge yawn. Close to an hour had passed since the training exercise began. He and Lyle were still standing around watching it from afar.

“You look bored,” General Gazell said with a wry grin.

“Seems a good reason to let us go, Master.”

“Not a chance. I want you to participate later. You’ll go a round with me.”

At those words, the two of them tensed up.

“But that’s later. What do you think of the training?”

“About ten stand out. For me, only four are good enough to be worth fighting.”

General Gazell laughed at Dida’s flippant comment. “And you, Lyle?”

“Hmm... I’d take two, maybe? The others are fine on the training ground, but I wouldn’t want to take them into a real battle. Their swords are too light.” When he said this, he of course didn’t mean physical weight but the intent with which they wielded their blades.

“Ooh, so Lyle’s the more critical judge, hm?” General Gazell understood why, so his smile held a grim edge.

“Come on, Master. You know his motto is ‘Tough on yourself, tough on others.’”

“Or maybe you’re just too easy on people, Dida,” said Lyle.

“Yeah, yeah, or maybe your expectations are too high. Especially of these guys. They’re floundering in a basic training exercise.”

Dida’s eyes were flat and emotionless as he studied the men. They were in the midst of an exercise to increase their stamina. It seemed much harder than their usual training regimen, but to Dida and Lyle, disciples of General Gazell himself, it looked incredibly elementary.

“Master... Perhaps you should stop gallivanting across the realm and train them more assiduously? They need more real field experience as well.”

“Don’t say that. There haven’t been any battles since the Tweil War anyway.

Not to mention that the knights are so rarely sent to the front line. And all the hardened soldiers are already guarding the borders.”

“Hm...”

“Oh, they’re calling for me. You go ahead and join us whenever you like.”

Dida and Lyle didn’t move. They’d done their own drills first thing that morning, long before they came to the palace.

“Say, Lyle, which ones do you want to fight?”

“The brown-haired knight and the soldier with the black hair in the back over there.”

“Heh. Same. I’ll take the knight, you take the soldier.”

“I was just about to say the same thing to you.”

The two smirked mischievously at each other. As they were already here, they figured they might as well take on the two strongest men the armed forces had to offer.

“Hey, you two.”

Someone suddenly called out to them. They turned, suspicion in their eyes, and saw Dorssen Kataberia standing before them.

“Do you need something?” Dida asked, not bothering to hide his contempt.

“I don’t need anything except for you to leave this place at once.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t know how you managed to butter up General Gazell, but you need to give up on your delusions of grandeur and stay in your own little world.”

“Delusions of what now?”

“You’re dreaming of joining the royal knights, aren’t you? Why else would you people come here?”

Another knight rushed over, sensing the tension. “Hey, Dorssen! Knock it off. Those two are—”

“Dreaming about being knighted? Ha. That’s a funny joke, eh, Lyle?” Dida

laughed coldly, at which Lyle nodded, expressionless. “I’d never serve the kingdom. What has this country ever done for us? Our *mistress* saved us. You think we’d ever even consider leaving her? Listen up, rich boy—don’t worry your pretty little head. We’ve never once thought about becoming lowly knights. Not even once.”

“Lowly knights?! You arrogant—draw your sword this instant!”

Dida laughed out loud at this challenge. By now, the rest of the men had heard the commotion and realized a fight was imminent.

“Draw my sword? Sure, I’ll take you on.” Dida followed Dorssen over to the training yard. Lyle made no move to stop him.

“O-oi, Dida,” General Gazell called, bewildered.

Dida smiled coldly. “Rich boy here challenged me to a fight. You don’t mind, do you, Knight Commander?”

Dida directed this question to Doruna, who solemnly nodded. “My apologies for the trouble.”

“Well, the knight commander gave us his permission, so let’s fight.”

In his heart of hearts, General Gazell wondered if an unspoken “...to the death” was hidden in Dida’s challenge, but he held his tongue. “I’ll be the judge,” he said instead.

“Thank you, Master.”

The knights and soldiers cleared the area as Dida and Dorssen faced off.

“Begin!”

Dorssen snapped to action the moment General Gazell spoke the word. His speed was enviable for a newly minted knight, yet Dida expertly answered his every move.

“A knight’s job is to protect the royal family and the palace, right?” Dida asked, utterly collected as Dorssen struggled to keep up with him. “I’m sure you don’t want lessons from a mere bodyguard, but what do you think is the most necessary skill for a professional protector?”

Dorssen gave Dida a suspicious, puzzled look as if to say, “Huh?”—but he didn’t have the chance.

“Do you think it’s the strength to kill as many people as possible? No, of course not.” Dida had been on the defense, but now he batted away Dorssen’s sword.

“Hah!” Dorssen struggled to fend off these techniques—too fast, too sharp—that outstripped the skills he had thus far worked to cultivate. Dida’s bladework inspired a primal fear within him. If he couldn’t win this—

“You have to be able to forsake physical strength,” Dida continued. “If you face an enemy who’s flat-out better than you, and you’ve got someone to protect, you still have to figure out how to defeat them. Right? You have to protect your master. So maybe you realize the best plan of attack isn’t to fight at all but to run. Or maybe you have to sacrifice someone else so your master can live.”

Dorssen could no longer fend off Dida, and he fell back onto the ground.

“We watched you guys train. I can tell you’re better than the other new knights. And you’ve got what it takes to improve, but only to a point. You’re overconfident in your own strength and abilities, so you challenged someone whose strength you misjudged... Not to mention, any man who raises a hand to a woman has no decorum—and no business being a knight.” Dida approached Dorssen. He raised his sword. “I don’t know how much pride you take in being a knight. But I don’t consider you one.”



“That’s enough, Dida!” General Gazell shouted the second Dida moved to bring down his sword.

“You’re such a worrywart, Master. I’d never actually strike. Anyway, this is just a practice sword. The tip’s busted.”

“No, no. You were going to do it! You can’t fool me.”

Dida laughed despite the general’s tone.

“That’s enough, now.”

“I know, Master.” Dida obeyed and left the training grounds.

An odd tension hung in the air, but the general swiftly called for everyone to resume training. Meanwhile, Dorssen remained lying face up on the ground.

“Are you stupid or something?” a senior knight called out to him with exasperation. Dorssen scowled, but the knight continued. “Those two don’t need to make connections. Both the royal knights and the military have already tried to recruit them.”

“What?”

“They’re General Gazell’s favorite apprentices. If you were going to compare them to one of our own, they’re as strong as Commander Malcolm.”

“Seriously?” Dorssen was speechless. Commander Malcolm was an exceptional knight of wide renown.

“I’m genuinely pleased that you take so much pride in being a knight,” the officer went on, harshly reprimanding him. “You’re respectful to your superiors and kind to your peers. But your world is too small. You’re one of the order now, so you need to start taking responsibility for your words and actions. You can no longer act without decorum—without honor.”

Dorssen couldn’t say a word in response.

The next day, I finished up my work and was enjoying some tea.

“Morning, Iris.”

“Oh, Grandfather! Welcome back. Lyle and Dida didn’t come home last night. Do you know why?”

“Sorry. They had too much to drink.”

I thought Grandfather looked a little guilty, and he confessed that he’d had to take Lyle and Dida home after carousing with them. Grandfather drank like a fish, so I was certain my bodyguards had felt pressured to keep up with him.

“Tanya, make sure they drink plenty of water.”

“Yes, my lady.”

After I gave Tanya instructions, I sat across from Grandfather. “I know you can take an awful lot, but you shouldn’t drink too much. Maybe you ought to cut back a bit on the alcohol.”

“Ugh...” Grandfather looked away awkwardly. He *loved* his drink.

“How much did you have last night?”

“We started out with the knights and the soldiers. But since I couldn’t really let loose with them, the three of us went out alone afterward.”

“Oh, my.”

So that was the cause. Grandfather had often brought Lyle and Dida out on the town with him while they were training, ostensibly so they could learn their own limits when it came to alcohol, but every time, they came back largely insensible. Grandfather was so fond of them that they always ended up overindulging to please him.

“Pardon me.”

“Tanya? What is it?”

“Rudius is here for General Gazell.”

“What?!” My grandfather looked flustered. I rarely saw him like that, so I had to laugh. “Tell him I’m not here!”

“But...” Tanya trailed off awkwardly.

Just then, Rudius poked his head out from behind her. “I heard you were drinking again, Grandfather.”

“N-no, I—”

“How many times have I told you to control yourself? Your face is known throughout the kingdom. Don’t come crying to me if you pass out after bingeing and someone takes the opportunity to attack you! Please, Grandfather, spare a thought for restraint when you’re out in public!”

My grandfather seemed to shrink with every word Rudius spoke.

Rudius was the son of my mother’s older brother—in other words, my cousin from House Anderson. My uncle, the marquis, wasn’t as physically powerful as my grandfather, so he hadn’t joined the military or the knights. The same went for Rudius; he was studying to follow in his father’s footsteps, although I wasn’t sure what exactly he was studying.

At any rate, he was definitely my grandfather’s grandson. He moved like a warrior—like Lyle or Dida—and his body was slender yet muscular.

“Nice to see you, Rudy.”

“And you, Iris. My apologies as well. It’s been so long since we saw each other last, and I have every regret that these are the circumstances of our reunion.”

Rudius was two years older than me, so we’d been at the academy together for only one year. Since we hadn’t been in the same grade, we hadn’t had much occasion to interact, especially after my expulsion.

“It’s fine. I was just telling Grandfather he should cut back on the alcohol.”

“Really? I’m glad you’re on his case, too. He never listens to me, but he can’t help himself with you.”

“Oh, that’s not true. Ah, would you like some tea?”

“My thanks for the invitation, but I’m afraid I have another engagement. Come along, Grandfather.”

“Ugh...”

I smiled. “Grandfather, thank you so much for seeing Lyle and Dida back. Please go on home and rest.”

“B-but I want to stay here,” Grandfather scowled.

“What are you going on about? Come on. Home, now,” Rudius said firmly.

I always enjoyed these exchanges.

“Iris, let’s talk again later,” Rudius said as he dragged Grandfather out of the room. Just how much strength was he packing in that small frame?

Everything quieted after that, like the calm following a storm.

“Tanya. May I have another cup of tea?”

“Of course, my lady.”

I considered resting a while longer, but then Berne came in.

“May I join you, if you’re not busy?” he asked.

“Of course.”

Tanya, the ever-attentive servant, quickly served Berne some tea.

“It’s been a long time since we talked like this, Berne.”

I hadn’t seen him since the Foundation Day celebration. I had been preoccupied with my own affairs, and Berne was busy helping our father with his work.

“Yes, that’s right.” Berne agreed as he took a sip of his herbal tea. He must have liked it, because his face softened with relaxation. “I was wondering if you were going home to the duchy.”

“Yes, I am. I’ve left it unattended for far too long. I really should be going back soon. But how have you been lately?”

“I’ve been learning quite a bit from Father. I need to make up for all the time I wasted playing around.”

“I wouldn’t say you were playing. Don’t worry so much. There are many important things you can only experience in school.”

I’d certainly felt that way in my past life a lot. Your school days are incredibly important. You definitely realize that once you start working. Being with people your own age, studying and forging friendships and fighting all in the same space... There are tough times, but there are irreplaceably amazing ones, too.

Now that my school days were over, I really felt that to be deeply true.

“And I stole those important things from you, Sister.”

“What?”

His voice had grown quiet all of a sudden, and I wasn't entirely sure I'd caught what he said. Nevertheless, he was pale, and I could tell something was amiss.

“Sister... Please allow me to apologize.”

“This is a bit startling. Apologize for what?” I didn't really have to ask, though. I was all but certain what he meant to imply.

“For getting you expelled.”

Even though I'd known what he was going to say, I found I had wanted to hear those words from his mouth. “My expulsion?” I asked. “There's nothing to apologize for. It was a result of my actions, driven by my emotions. In other words, it was my own fault.”

“You said that before. But I didn't believe it then either. All I could think of back then was winning Yuri's affection. It drove me to everything I did. I acted on my feelings, and I gave no thought to the consequences.”

“Is this to say that your aspirations to become prime minister are a form of apology to me?”

It sounded like he was declaring he had decided to never again be carried away by his emotions. It really did seem like this was why he had decided to commit to learning from our father.

“That's part of it, but not all.”

“Well, what else is there?”

“I lost myself in my feelings for Yuri and acted solely on those emotions. But at the same time, I thought myself better than you. I freely blamed you for everything, even though you also have a heart and did what you did because it was hurt. It's so obvious now, but at the time, I failed to understand. So I want to apologize to you as your brother.”

I was speechless. On one hand, I felt like it was too late for such an apology,

but on the other hand, it gave me the slightest comfort. After everything that had happened, I'd stopped thinking of Berne as my brother, all because at that time, at that moment, he'd chosen Yuri over me.

The me from my past life could calmly observe his actions and think, "Well, it's no wonder he chose the girl he loved," but the me who was Iris had screamed, "Why, why?" inside her heart. "Why don't you understand me?" and "Why have even *you* abandoned me, Berne?" I understood both sets of feelings, and I pitied myself for the agony of my heart.

I'd never had much of a relationship with Dorssen and Van, so I honestly hadn't cared about their reactions. But Edward and Berne were different. Their betrayal was the moment I'd lost hope. The man I loved slandered me, and then my own brother turned his back on me. They both chose Yuri. Realizing that they could forsake me so easily left me in a state of absolute shock. Then they humiliated me to the umpteenth degree, confronting me in front of all those people—*attacking* me.

Since that was the exact moment when I'd regained the memories of my past life, I hadn't really absorbed it all at the time, but under normal circumstances, I would have been terrified. That was why, ever since, I'd vowed to never fall in love, nor to place my complete trust in anyone ever again—because I had been abandoned by my own family.

As my brother was the reason I had come to this way of thinking, accepting his apology would be no mean feat. Even now, conflicting emotions warred within me; his apology left my past self numb, while it made Iris want to mend things with her brother.

"I...accept your apology. But I can't say that I forgive you. Not straight away."

I wondered... If Yuri were in my shoes, would she instantly say she forgave him at a time like this? I had to let out a self-deprecating chuckle at that ridiculous thought.

Yet Berne gave me a satisfied smile. "That's more than enough for me."

At last, it was time to go home. I steeled myself as I stood outside my father's

room, whereupon I knocked on the door and entered. “Pardon me, Father.”

He glanced up at me from within his piles of documents. It was uncannily nostalgic. I’d come to his office to speak with him once before, directly following my expulsion. That now felt like the distant past.

“Are you returning, then?”

“Yes. I’ll be leaving the capital tomorrow.”

“I see.” Father set down his pen with a clink and gestured for me to sit in the chair in front of his desk.

“Thank you,” I said as I sat.

“There’s something I need to warn you about.” His stern tone made me sit up straighter. He was quite tense, even compared to our last meeting in this room.

“What is it?”

“You must be on your guard with Queen Ellia and House Marea.”

“Yes, I have handled our interactions with care—especially since they lead the second prince’s faction.” I was a bit puzzled. I didn’t quite understand what more he was getting at.

“That’s not the issue. The queen dowager indicated that you had her backing both publicly and privately at the Foundation Day celebration.”

“So you mean to say that because of that, Queen Ellia and House Marea now see me as a direct threat?”

The second prince had broken our engagement, so they knew there was no way I would support their camp. It wasn’t only a matter of my own personal feelings—my doing so would worsen their public image as well. Thus, I was a bit of a problem for Queen Ellia in every regard.

“No. Not *you*. House Armelia.”

“What?”

“House Marea has always seen House Armelia as a thorn in their side. Even though one of their line is now the queen, I am the prime minister, and Merry is both the queen dowager’s favorite and one of the most influential members of

high society. We've always stood above House Marea. But since I've remained neutral in the conflict between the factions, Merry has been able to avoid the power struggles within the palace. As such, even though we're a threat to House Marea, they've never tried to undermine us; the risks were too great. But..."

"The second prince broke off his engagement with me, the daughter of Duke Armelia, and now I've gained power."

"Precisely. You've had more success as acting governor than anyone could have imagined. You've even built a successful company. And all in such little time. As such, our family has gained such presence that House Marea can no longer sit idly by."

"I-I'm sorry..." How pathetic of me—I'd just kept charging along at full speed, accepting all my success without even thinking of the far-reaching consequences. If only I'd thought even a little about how my work might play out politically, it would have been so obvious.

I'd only been elevated to the role of acting governor because of my father's kindness. I couldn't believe I'd managed to cause trouble for my family yet again!

"It was my fault for underestimating your ability," he said. "There's no need for you to apologize."

"But..."

"Luckily, nothing has come of this yet. That's why I want you to proceed with exceeding caution when you return to the duchy."

"Yes, Father."

Suddenly, he rang the bell in front of him and a maid appeared.

"Get us something to drink."

"Yes, right away."

A few moments later, the maid set a teacup in front of me. I gladly sipped the tea, hoping it would calm my nerves.

"I know this sounds like I'm repeating myself, but..." my father started

hesitantly. “You must be cautious of Marquis Marea, but you must be extremely wary of Queen Ellia.”

“Why do you keep saying that?”

“She has changed since entering the palace.” My father spoke slowly, as if trying to find the right words. I wondered what he was so reluctant to say. “To the extent that there are rumors saying she was the one responsible for the late queen’s death.”

“You...you haven’t investigated her, Father?”

“I found no evidence when I did. Lacking that, should I have openly accused the new queen, daughter of a marquis?”

“Pardon my rudeness.”

Now that I thought about it, in this world, it was incredibly difficult to prove anyone’s guilt or innocence, what with the lack of advanced scientific investigative tools we’d had in my other life. On top of that, the suspect in question was incredibly powerful and capable of doing anything. It was possible this was all merely a rumor spread by the first prince’s faction...but it could be the truth. I wasn’t sure either way, but I certainly needed to be careful of anyone about whom such rumors could be believably spread.

“At any rate, I wanted you to be aware of these sinister whisperings. Be vigilant, and take care of yourself.”

“Yes, Father.”

I realized I had begun to tremble. I didn’t want to make an enemy of the queen, but she probably already thought of me as her foe.

“I’ve already taken the initiative to inform Tanya, Lyle, and Dida. And now you know as well. Be careful.”

“I take your warning with utmost seriousness, Father.”

I had been on the verge of imprisonment and managed to escape it all the way to this point, after all. I didn’t want to die now. Not to mention, I would leave behind too many regrets if I abandoned the people of my duchy. All the changes I was trying to instigate would be left forever unfinished.

"I heard you've been investigating the baron's daughter, Yuri Neuer?"

"You certainly seem to know everything that's going on, Father."

"Yes, well. How much have you found out?"

"Ms. Yuri's mother was a maid at the palace."

"I see. It was House Rubens who provided her recommendation."

"House Rubens?" I frowned at him; I'd never heard of that family before.

"That's all I can tell you about that." His voice was so firm I gave up trying to press him for more details. "I'm sure that information will be enough to guide you to the truth of the matter. But don't pry overmuch. You're already in a tight position as it is."

"So then, why...?"

"Because I don't want you provoking them by sending your orphans to nose about the palace. If you just need to investigate a noble house, you can do so through books, no?"

"Thank you for the information." So he didn't want me to keep digging. I certainly couldn't just do whatever I wanted without thinking now, especially after hearing all this. That was my father, though; there was no way to defy him. "And thank you for your time. I'll excuse myself now."

"Mm. Watch yourself on your way." It sounded like he was saying, *"Be careful on the way home, too."*

He was right, though. If House Marea or the queen were planning on making a move against me, it would be to their advantage to do so while I was traveling. I would have to listen carefully to Tanya, Lyle, and Dida on our way home.

Now, then. I wasn't having some big farewell party, but I said goodbye to those close to me and informed them of my plan to return to the duchy. My entire family and all of the servants came to see me off. After all that, even though I was going "home," I did feel a little sad to leave them all.

“My lady. We’re going to be traveling quickly, so it might not be comfortable. I just wanted to make you aware.”

“It’s fine, Tanya. I know that you’re all putting my safety first, so I’ve no complaints.”

As Tanya implied, the road home was no picnic. We traveled by carriage during the day and stayed at inns incognito during the night. We left again once the sun rose. It took days and was terribly tiring, but I couldn’t complain. My attendants had designed this travel plan in my best interests.

“I’m sorry, everyone.”

I got to sit in the carriage the whole way, but my bodyguards were all on horseback without so much as a break. They suffered far more than I did, leaving me feeling awfully guilty. I kept apologizing about it.

“There’s no reason for apologies, my lady,” said Tanya. “We’re doing our jobs.”

“Lyle and Dida are even tenser than usual because of who we suspect, aren’t they?”

We had been together since we were small, so I could read Tanya’s feelings on her poker face, just like I could tell how the other two were feeling by their mood and casual gestures. Normally, they never lost their composure, but I could tell they were entirely on edge. The air had been tense since we left.

We knew we might or might not be attacked, and if we were, we wouldn’t know what to expect. They might come at us head-on, or they might come stealthily in the middle of the night. They might use open brutality or a poisoned weapon to take my life. The people we were up against had the means to prepare any number of weapons or assassins for this task. The royal family itself had painted a target on my back.

Any of my guardians could have at any time decided it was far too troublesome to work for someone like me and gone to find other employment—especially Lyle and Dida. Yet they remained by my side. No words could explain how happy that made me.

Suddenly, Lyle knelt before me, as if reading my thoughts.

“I take pride in being your sword and shield, my lady. And I shall take up my sword now and forever for your sake.”

After he was done speaking, my other guards also knelt.

“We still remember that promise.”

They were talking about the promise we’d made when we were out touring the duchy, when we stopped on that hill overlooking the ports.

“Will you give me your everything?”

They had agreed to that, but I still had to admit I was surprised at how things had played out since, leading up to this day.

“Thank you, everyone.”

Our little break ended, and I got back in the carriage. I absently gazed out the window through the curtain. We were nearly back home. I just wanted to be there already. Those thoughts swirled in my head as I watched the scenery pass.

Then, finally, we reached Armelia. I was warmed by nostalgia, of course, but mainly I was incredibly relieved to have arrived safely.

“Welcome home, my lady.” Sebastian, Sei, and the rest of the servants who had stayed behind all greeted me. “We heard your journey was most tiring. Please go and rest.”

“Thank you, Sebastian. And thank you all for welcoming us back home.”

I really was grateful for Sebastian’s suggestion. To no surprise, that anxious journey had left me exhausted. But now that I was here, I sagged with relief, and the fatigue overcame me all at once.

Sebastian escorted me back to my room. As soon as I got there, I took a shower and changed into more comfortable clothing. Then I melted into my chair and sipped the herbal tea Tanya had prepared for me.

“You must be tired too, Tanya. Go ahead and rest for today. I’m going to sleep.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

She really must have been exhausted, because she didn't so much as protest.

I let out a sigh and wrapped my arms around my trembling body. Nothing had happened to me this time. That didn't mean I could let my guard down. House Marea might not try to merely remove me from my position. They could very well try to kill me. But I couldn't simply sit back because I was scared—and running away was out of the question.

At any rate, for the time being, I needed to rest. When I at last crawled into bed, I fell into a deep, exhausted sleep.

Chapter 8:

The Duke's Daughter Gets to Work in Armelia

THE NEXT DAY, I woke up at the usual time. I'd gone to bed quite early the night before, so I'd thought I would awaken earlier, but that just went to show how truly tired I'd been. I felt far more alert and rested. I did my yoga, showered, and changed. It felt like a perfectly normal morning. I took breakfast in my room, enjoying Armelian food for the first time in ages.

"My lady." I was drinking tea after breakfast when Sebastian came into the room with an apologetic look on his face.

"Yes, Sebastian? I'm going to start work early today. I know you sent me letters and reports, but I'd like you to update me on everything the various branches have been up to. I'll speak with those in charge too, if that's necessary."

I had to get to work reading and signing the documents that had piled up in my absence as well as get up to speed on the goings-on in the duchy. That was my first priority upon coming home. Therefore, I went to my study and found a tidy yet sizable mountain of papers on my desk.

"All right, I'll read through the documents first. I'll call you in later."

"Yes, my lady."

"Also, bring Lyle and Dida in here, please."

I got to work on the documents after Sebastian left. Just as my mind wandered, wondering when I would ever get through checking all these papers, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in. Oh, Dean!" I couldn't hide my surprise at this unexpected visitor.

"It's been a long time, my lady."

"You can say that again! You came here while I was in the capital too, didn't you? Thank you ever so much."

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“Oh? All right, then. In any case, Dean, I have so many questions to ask you.” After we exchanged pleasantries, I brought up every question I’d had while reading through the documents. Apparently, he and Sebastian had done the bulk of the work while I was away, so I was incredibly grateful that he’d showed up when he did.

“And we’re done with the land readjustment project for the capital. We’ve also finished drawing up family registers for the entire population, so all that’s left is to confirm land ownership rights.”

The projects I had set into motion before going to the capital were progressing. There were many residences in our capital, so it was relatively easy to establish land ownership here, as the citizens had used basic contracts at the time of selling and buying their homes. But the farther you got from the capital, the less clear-cut circumstances became. In farming villages, it was far more difficult to tell where one person’s land stopped and the next property began.

“Indeed. And finally, the eastern territory is largely complete. Meanwhile, the Azuta Corporation sorted out land ownership in the southern territories, where our cacao is produced, at the time we initiated our contracts with the farmers, so that registry is mostly finished as well. For the most part, it’s the western and northern territories that require attention.”

“Hmm...I suppose we’ll just have to go to those areas and talk with the residents.”

“Yes, that’s Abitante’s first priority right now, aside from conducting the census you requested.”

“I see. Yes, let’s go forward with all those plans.”

As we continued, confirming details, there was another knock at the door.

“I’m sorry. Is this a bad time?”

“Oh, Merida! Long time no see. Could you wait a moment?”

“No need. I’ll excuse myself now,” said Dean. “I’ll go ahead and convey your orders to the various heads of all the branches.”

“Thank you, Dean.”

He bowed and left the room.

“I’m sorry,” said Merida.

“Not at all. You’re always so busy, though. What brings you here?”

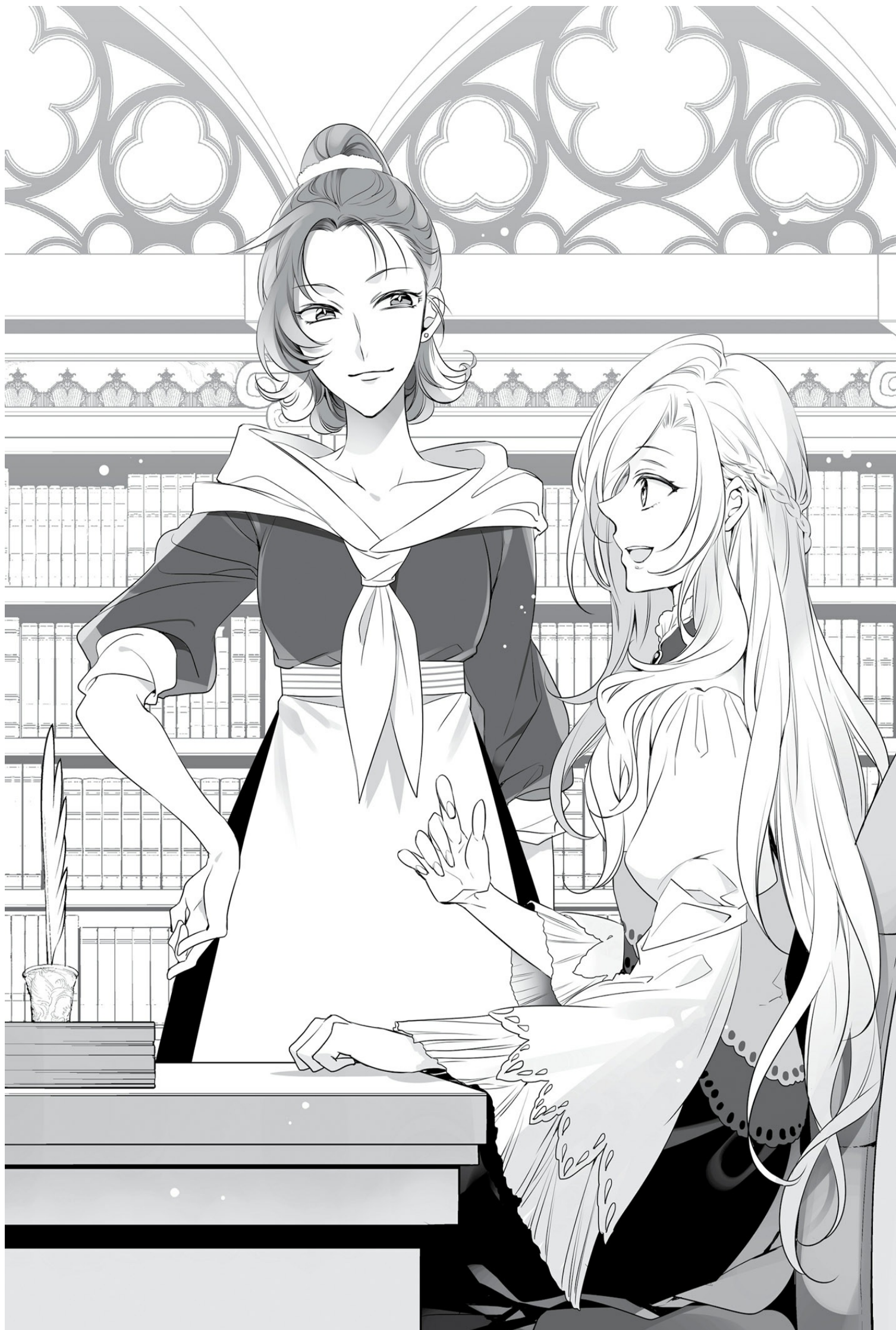
I’d left Merida in charge of our cafés, so she was usually either on site at one of them or traveling between them. It was rare for me to see her at the estate.

“Not as busy as you, my lady. I heard you were in danger on your trip home, so of course, I worried. I wanted to check on you.”

“Thank you. But as you can see, I’m fine.”

“Well, of course you are. Otherwise, I would’ve given Lyle and Dida what for.”

I had to laugh at Merida’s characteristic tone of voice.



“Also, I wanted to tell you I finished the new items you requested.”

“Oh? Have you brought them with you?” I’d asked Merida to make desserts from gelatin we’d obtained from trading with the neighboring kingdom.

“No, I just wanted to make you aware. I came here in a rush, so unfortunately, I forgot to bring them. I’ll show you sometime later.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

“Also, that coffee drink you mentioned? When would you like me to start serving that at the cafes?”

Oho! It seemed she’d tied off another of my projects while I was away.

We hadn’t yet managed to find any actual coffee beans, so we were making dandelion coffee. It was definitely a different experience for me, since I’d been an avid coffee drinker in my past life.

“Well, we haven’t advertised it yet, so I think it’ll be a while,” I said. “Until then, I’d appreciate it if you started thinking of ways to add coffee to your desserts.”

“Understood. I was thinking about lingering here for a while. I’ll work on those while I’m about.”

“Wonderful.”

“So? How was it, being back at the capital after such a long time?”

“I thought I’d feel more strongly about it. But really, I didn’t feel anything.”

“Nothing?”

“No. Of course I felt nostalgic, and happy when I saw old friends and my family, but apparently, I didn’t have any lingering attachment to the capital itself.”

“You sound like you’ve really gotten over it,” Merida observed with a chuckle.

“More like I realized I never belonged there in the first place.”

I’d regained the memories of my other life right in the thick of the incident that drove me from it, after all. I’d come here soon afterward, so the newly

combined me hadn't had much time to get too attached to the capital. Regardless, it would have been too stifling to stay there, weighed down by the expectations laid on a duke's daughter as well as by everything that had happened with Yuri.

"Hm, I guess that's just how it is."

"That's right. This is my home, and you all are my family. That's enough for me."

"Ha ha ha. Well, I'm honored."

Merida and I talked for a while longer until she left the room.

After that, I resumed my work checking various documents. We'd begun trading with other countries, and our company's revenue had skyrocketed, along with profits from numerous innovations we'd been developing at our academy. With the creation of so many new jobs, individual income was on the rise. We were also sorting out infrastructure in Armelia's various territories. The capital city's infrastructure was so well organized that everything ran smoothly, but some places in the duchy still didn't have running water or proper sewers.

After I checked on the progress of all of that, I signed the necessary documents and fixed those in need of fixing. By that time, it was already fairly late at night.

"Ah... I'm exhausted..." I moaned as I rubbed my eyes. I looked out the window to find it already dark outside. As I lived in and worked out of the governor's mansion, a good deal of land surrounded the property. With no other residences nearby, it grew extremely dark after sunset. The one good thing about this was that the stars shone so brightly at night. I peeled my attention from the documents and gazed up at those stars.

"Excuse me. May I have a moment?"

Dean stood in my doorway.

"Of course. What is it?"

"I'm sorry to bother you so late, but I have this for you."

He'd brought me a document that required urgent response. I checked it over and took care of the items needing my attention.

"I'm terribly sorry. You seemed to be at rest." Dean bowed his head in apology.

"It's all right. I'm surprised to see you up working this late."

"It seems to me you're the last person who ought to lecture me on such matters, my lady. In any case, my time in Armelia is limited, so I strive to finish as much as I possibly can now, in order to ensure the work is manageable next time I come around."

So the work would be manageable, would it? He tried to make it sound like he did this for his own benefit, but I understood that he was trying to lessen my burden as much as he could. Every bit of work he took charge of was work I then didn't have to do. But for all that, there was still nothing forcing him to return.

"You really needn't work so hard."

"I'm well aware, my lady. Why don't you take a real break? I was just about to myself."

"Well... All right, then."

The two of us stepped out onto the balcony. Right before I'd left for the capital, I'd asked for a table and chairs to be placed out there so I could use the space to rest when I took my eyes off my work. Tanya had reluctantly agreed. She would have preferred it if I took my breaks away from the study entirely.

"So, how was the capital?"

"It was fine. Not much to say about it, really?"

"Nothing?"

"Mm-hmm. Between you and me, I honestly couldn't wait to come back home."

"Ha ha ha. Everyone dreams about the social season in the capital, what with the fetes and balls, but I suppose it would take more than that to impress you, hm?"

“Ha ha. I suppose.”

The series of parties were certainly fancy. But behind the curtains, the social season’s events were nothing more than a game of cat and mouse among the nobles. Also, the capital didn’t hold any good memories for me. Especially now, with this whole business with Queen Ellia.

“How have you been, Dean?”

“Nothing much happened on my end either. I attended to some of my family’s work, visited some friends. That was about it.”

“That reminds me—you haven’t really told me anything about your family. Do you have siblings?”

For some reason, Dean’s face clouded over. I instantly realized I had asked him something I shouldn’t have; his reaction made that abundantly clear.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t pry.”

“No, it’s all right. I have a younger brother and sister.”

“Ah, one of each? Hey, Dean... Can I ask you something strange?” The mention of a younger brother had reminded me of Berne. “Have you ever fought with your siblings?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Well, as you know, I also have a younger brother. We had quite a falling-out a while ago... And I had pretty much cut ties with him for good before returning to Armelia. But while I was at the capital, my brother apologized to me. I found I couldn’t forgive him, though. I just couldn’t overcome the anger I still felt toward him.” A self-deprecating smile crossed my face. “Am I insensitive? As the older sibling, shouldn’t I just let bygones be bygones and relinquish the grudge? I suppose that’s a difficult question to ask.”

“That’s true. I can’t really give you an answer.” Dean paused for a moment and then continued. “Especially as I can’t honestly say my relationship with my siblings is healthy either.”

I looked at him with surprise. “Really? You too?”

“Yes. I suppose I get along well enough with my sister, but things are worse

between me and my brother than between you and yours.”

This last comment bothered me. Not that it was anything to brag about, but it would be terribly difficult to top the strife between Berne and me. We hadn’t spoken for several years, and he’d debased me in public, and he’d done it all while Yuri had been uprooting my life before his eyes. I honestly couldn’t imagine a worse sibling relationship.

But Dean’s answer left no room for doubt. “I don’t even consider him family, to be honest with you. If we had been born in separate houses, our relationship would be over. The only thing keeping us from total alienation is that the same blood runs in our veins. At the same time, I think we both resent each other for that blood. And we both feel like the other is merely in the way.”

As he spoke, his voice grew so cold, I was almost afraid. His face and his eyes were blank, reflecting no emotions. But strangely, I didn’t feel uncomfortable—because I had felt the exact same way.

“So I can’t say anything much on the matter. Although...thanks to my sister, I have at least come to understand the warmth of being with family, and I am endlessly grateful for that. However, I don’t believe there’s anything to be done about my brother. I’ve given up on him.”

“I see...” I smiled a little. “Your answer has made me feel a bit better, though. I felt like I ought to act in a certain way toward my brother simply because we’re siblings. I keep thinking about what I ought to do as his older sister. But I believe now I’ll try to put that approach aside.”

“Good.” Dean smiled a little as well.

The uneasy feeling in my heart had cleared, just a touch.

“Now, may I ask you a question?” Dean asked.

“Of course.”

“Why did you look that way when I mentioned returning here ‘next time’?”

My mind blanked for a moment—his tone was so casual that I was caught off guard. But pausing like that made it obvious this wasn’t something I could brush off. I pulled myself back to reality, regretting my lapse. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Whatever do you mean?”

“The expression on your face. I felt like you wished things were more distant between us. There’s an odd tension in the air, even now.”

Oh, dear. Now what? It was incredibly difficult to deny anything was wrong after he had so accurately guessed my feelings.

“Dean... If you’re so aware of my feelings, you must understand the position I’m in.”

Even if he didn’t know the queen herself had named me a rival, he had to know my position in the kingdom was the picture of precarity.

He smiled in agreement. “Of course. But that has nothing to do with whether I return.”

I hadn’t expected him to say that, so it took me a few seconds to comprehend exactly what he meant.

“Dean... Do you mean it?”

“Of course I do. I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t.”

I stared at him, searching his face. His eyes were impassive; I had no idea what he was thinking, but I knew he was serious.

“Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea have decided I’m trouble. Can you still say you mean it, now that I’ve told you outright?”

“I’m surprised. Did you really think me so unfeeling?”

I widened my eyes in surprise. Did I really sound like I was implying as much? “Of course I don’t—but you also have no reason to stay here. Our contracts have always been short-term. You have no obligation to remain. Moreover, I’m sure you could find far more lucrative employment in numerous other circumstances. So again, you have no reason to stay.”

At the time of signing, we’d established his rate of pay. As he served as my right hand to govern the duchy, his salary was a bit higher than that of the average state official. That being said, those salaries weren’t all that high to begin with. I paid some of my business advisors more than I paid Dean. The only advantage to being a state official was job security; you never had to worry over

whether the duchy would go out of business, like you might with a company. However, that job security didn't apply to Dean, since his contracts were always temporary.

I had no right to keep him here, and he was free to do as he pleased while not under contract with me. He really had no meaningful attachment to Armelia.

"I didn't know you valued me so highly, my lady," he said in a joking tone.

I was just trying to be honest. I let out a sigh, which only made him smile more.

"I suppose if you took my work out of the equation, I've never before struggled, nor truly hit a wall."

That was a rather bold statement. Dean just kept surprising me. Although I had more or less already guessed as much.

"But that's awfully boring, you know? It's just like studying or exercise. Neither feels especially fulfilling until you get to an obstacle that you must work hard to overcome. Once something becomes too easy, it's no longer exciting."

All that made a great deal of sense to me. I'd felt that way in my other life. When I'd come upon a particularly difficult problem, even though getting through it was a struggle, I always felt an incredible sense of accomplishment once I did.

But I really didn't understand what exactly he meant at this very moment.

"I've found my time in Armelia exciting—and rewarding—in the extreme. You inspire me to think in ways I'd never considered before, my lady. The same goes for the supremely talented people who work with you. You're truly revolutionizing the duchy. What will you try next? What will come of it? It's been so long since I encountered any such daring schemes. That's why it's so interesting, so invigorating."

He stared deeply into my eyes as he spoke, and the intense eye contact made me feel a bit shy.

"That's why I continue to return. I only intended to do so the once, but I just keep coming back."

The amused smile suddenly vanished from his face, which tightened into a serious expression.

“My lady, I understand if you cannot place your full trust in me. I was the one to say I could only enter into a temporary contract with you. Not to mention that you have people in your employ who have been with you since your childhood.”

I did trust them all implicitly. In fact, besides Mother and Father, they were the *only* people I entirely trusted.

“I won’t ask you to treat me as you treat them. I cannot compete with the long years you’ve spent with them or with the intimacy you share. But, my lady...I relish working for you, from the bottom of my heart. It’s all that I wish to do. Even after my contract has expired.”

“Dean...”

“You need not ever hold back with me. Even though for the time being, I can only be with you for a short time...I’m already yours. And I have been for a very long time.”

My face flushed at these words. In every other circumstance in my life, I had been the one to confess any such feeling of devotion to another. To be on the flip side left me terribly nervous.

He looked at me once more and said, “I’ll take my leave; there’s more to do,” then left.

For a long while after, I simply sat there in stunned silence.

A week passed, and I was very nearly caught up with all my work. It helped that Dean was staying for an extended period. Speaking of Dean, things were surprisingly normal between us. Even though I’d been so flustered and thought for sure our relationship would be unbearably awkward, it wasn’t. It frustrated me a bit, to be honest.

Anyway, I digress.

I was at the library to do research on the information my father had divulged.

The library was in a separate building from the main mansion. Its bookshelves stretched all the way up to the high ceilings of the main room, and books lay about here and there.

Rehme looked surprised to see me. “Hm? I haven’t seen you here in some time, my lady.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you were here, Rehme.”

“Yes. No classes for me today. But what brings you here?”

“Research. On House Rubens.”

“Duke Rubens? I haven’t heard that name in quite some time.”

But she *had* heard of it. Of course. Rehme had reacted to the name without even skipping a beat.

“So he’s a duke? Why haven’t I heard of this person before?”

“It’s only natural you haven’t! Many generations ago, it was the house of a prince. They didn’t have a proper duchy but instead owned land in the royal capital. The last time there was really any talk of them was probably thirty years ago.”

“Thirty years ago? Around the time of the Tweil War?”

“Yes, that’s right. As proof of the cease-fire, a princess of Tweil married into Tasmeria’s royal family. At the time, our monarch was a queen, and her son, the prince, was too young for the princess from Tweil. More importantly, if she had been taken into the royal family or someone too closely related to them, it would have interfered with the line of succession. Therefore they selected House Rubens. So long as the head of their house didn’t pass away prematurely, their own house’s line of succession would be secure—and they were of fine lineage.”

So in other words, House Rubens now had Tweil lineage. And Yuri Neuer’s mother had been brought to the royal palace via recommendation from House Rubens.

It would have been difficult to turn down her application with such a prestigious introduction. Moreover, House Rubens had accepted the princess

from Tweil upon order of the kingdom. If the palace had used her heritage as an excuse to turn a servant away, it would have been a diplomatic incident. Although, I suspected my father would have used that to his advantage either way.

At any rate, I'd now connected the dots and was beginning to see the big picture. Frankly, it was a bad one. To put it plainly, there was a tremendously high possibility that Yuri Neuer's mother was from Tweil or had close ties to it—and that she might have cultivated the same opinions in her daughter. All of this made perfect sense to me.

But as my father said, none of this was under my jurisdiction. A governor—an acting one at that—had no business getting involved in a power struggle between kingdoms. Especially not now when I had to secure my own footing here. One wrong move and it might all fall out from right under my feet.

"What's wrong, my lady? You look so pale all of a sudden."

"I was just thinking. But I'm fine."

Yes, I was fine. Right? My father was certainly also gathering information and making plans. But one thing kept nagging at me, and it was about *her*.

Let's say Yuri *was* a spy from Tweil. In that case, she'd doubtlessly succeeded in her aim. She had her claws in the second prince, and now they were engaged. But if she'd failed, what would Tweil have done? I had to imagine they wouldn't have just idly stood aside.

Then there were all the things Yuri had said and done. If she was a spy, shouldn't she have tried to blend in? You know, like a properly subtle agent of espionage? Or maybe I'd read too many spy novels in my past life. Her behavior just didn't seem consistent with that of a professional.

"Tanya." I called out. She was waiting behind me. "You're on my side, right?"

"Pardon me for saying so, but that question is meaningless. I belong to you, my lady. If you told me that you no longer needed me, my life would be without worth."

"I see. Then stop investigating Yuri."

“Yes, my lady.”

“But I want you to continue looking into Lord Monroe’s business and clients. I need to know the ranks and activities of as many families as I can. Including my father. I want that to be your first priority.”

I knew I was making a ridiculous request of Tanya—to investigate the very noble house she worked for. But she looked neither the least bit surprised nor flustered.

“Of course, my lady. I’ll tell my agents immediately. I’ll be gone for a while as well.”

“Yes, I understand. Please.”

She quickly left the room.

After that, I returned to my study. Entering it always strangely calmed me, likely because I’d spent more time there than anywhere else. I checked to see what work I had left to do, then called in Lyle, Dida, and Dean.

All three of them entered the room at the same time.

“You wanted to see us, my lady?” said Lyle.

“This is an awfully odd group,” snorted Dida. “What’s going on?”

Lyle scowled at Dida’s question, as usual, but Dida looked genuinely puzzled. Dean clearly agreed with him, because he nodded with a wry smile on his face.

“I require your assistance as my guards.”

The atmosphere suddenly became exceptionally tense.

“All three of us? Where are you planning to go, Princess?”

“Dida! I object, my lady. I can understand if you wish to travel around the duchy, but other than that...”

“I *am* leaving, and it’s because I must. I also want to be cautious about it, which is why I’m bringing all three of you with me.” Lyle and Dida were the most able fighters I knew, and the next after them was Dean. I’d sent Tanya away on the other matter, which made this the best possible arrangement left to me. “So let’s go.”

The sun felt so warm outside. With a tired smile on my face, I wondered when I'd last even left the estate. As we walked through Armelia's capital, I observed my surroundings. Yes, everything seemed peaceful for now.

"My lady. Would you please tell us what we're doing today?" Lyle's voice brought me back to reality.

"We're doing a lot of things, Lyle—because I'm not sure when I'll be able to leave the estate again. I want to observe the academy and chat with Headmaster Luca. I also want to visit the church and speak with Father Rafiel. Finally, I'd like to visit the orphanage."

"What do you need to address with Headmaster Luca?"

"The suggestions you gave me, Dean."

"Those suggestions weren't from me, my lady. The ideas originated with you. I only added to them."

"Oh? Is that right?"

We both smiled at each other.

Hm, good. Nothing had changed, at least on that front. Things were the same as they had always been between us. That was what I told myself as I followed Dida. The three of them walked in such a way that I was perfectly protected on all sides.

"Oh, right. There's another new restaurant in town, Princess. I heard it's great."

"Oh? That's lovely. Where did you learn of it?"

"The other guards."

"I'd definitely trust their taste."

The last time I asked Dida where he'd heard about a restaurant, his answer had been hesitant, and I still didn't really know why. He claimed he'd received the information from the officials at Borsa. I wondered sometimes about his personal connections, and also why he was talking about good restaurants with

tax officials.

This concerned me mainly because my impression was that my bodyguards put their work above all else and largely viewed food as sustenance, not something to be enjoyed. Even if that hadn't been their attitude when I first hired them, after a month or so on the job, they'd become workaholics. I had established that attitude to be fair, so really, it was my fault.

"Speaking of the other guards, we'll need to tighten up security across Armelia."

"What do you mean by that?" Lyle's curiosity was piqued.

"There's a chance our unfriendly acquaintances will target not only myself but our people."

"Then why *did* you leave the mansion today?" Lyle's tone was frustrated, but all I could do was chuckle apologetically.

Frankly, he was right.

"This matter will doubtlessly drag on for quite some time. If I waited until it was safe to see to these matters, I would be trapped at home forever. As such, I've brought you all with me today so I could tie up loose ends."

"I see. And besides the two of us, there's no better guard than Dean. Hence why you've brought him as well."

"Precisely."

And I couldn't have done so, if things had still been awkward between us.

"I'm honored," Dean replied with another impassive smile. "With your permission, if we're to secure the duchy, I think perhaps we should add more border reinforcements and checkpoints. Since trade is booming, merchants are constantly coming and going, as are travelers from other domains."

As usual, Dean was just giving me more work, if in a good way.

"I see. It's possible someone from our *friend's* camp will try entering the duchy, too. Instruct Abitante to revisit checkpoint procedures with that in mind. It will be essential to coordinate these efforts throughout our security forces. All right. We'll commence drawing up a plan when we get home."

Just then, we arrived at the academy. As usual, the building was swarming with people. Specifically, this was our institution of higher education. People of all genders, occupations, and ages came here, and everyone's eyes sparkled with possibility. I loved seeing all of these students and teachers, hungry for knowledge. I walked inside, pleased with the atmosphere.

"This place is incredible," Dean murmured.

Hm? Was this his first time here?

"I'm happy to hear you like it."

We reached the headmaster's door and I rapped softly on it, then went inside.

"It's good to see you again, Headmaster."

"Likewise, Lady Iris." Headmaster Luca gave me a warm smile and welcomed us in.

"How are things at the academy?"

"Same as always."

"I'm glad to hear it. Please don't hesitate to contact me the moment you run into any problems."

"I appreciate that very much. Now, what brings you here today?"

"I wanted your opinion on a matter, as someone who works on the front lines of education."

"Hm? Yes?"

"Right now, I'm working on establishing a preliminary trade school. At the moment, our elementary schools teach reading, writing, and arithmetic, but I was thinking about turning the focus to training for professional careers at the next level of education."

"What specifically do you mean?" Headmaster Luca's eyes gleamed with curiosity, though his expression remained serious.

"We're short on teachers, so I hoped we could train educators, as well as guards and so forth for our security forces. We could also have a medical track."

I *also* wanted to develop a private school funded by Azuta Corporation profits to train butlers and maids, but since that didn't have anything to do with Headmaster Luca, I didn't bring it up.

"Medical track? But we have one here at the academy, don't we? Is there a reason to develop a separate one?"

"I want to devise some basic courses for them to take before they enter the academy of higher education. Currently, most of our incoming students already have medical experience at a local level, but the children coming through our elementary schools won't have that experience. This way, they can learn the fundamentals at the trade school and further their education in the academy, whether it be as researchers or in the name of practical application. We'll be able to better tailor our courses to students at different levels. As long as you agree, that is."

"Hm, it's all very interesting. I do think implementing that plan will be quite effective in the long run."

"So then...?" I trailed off.

Headmaster Luca nodded. "May I offer one suggestion?"

"Of course. Go ahead."

"As long as you're establishing a trade school, I'd love to restructure the curriculum at the academy level, too."

"And what would you like to do, exactly?"

"If these students from the trade school will be coming to the academy with a degree of specialized knowledge, then I think we should break the medical track down even more into dedicated practical and research tracks. Presently, courses on the fundamentals, practical training, and research methodology are all mixed together. There's so much material to get through that the students are rarely, if ever, able to delve too deeply into any one subject. If we remove the general education classes from that mix, they'll be able to focus more on their specializations and deepen their learning. In short, I'd like to give them opportunities to train to become true experts."

"I see... Yes, this sounds totally feasible. But I'm no expert in curriculum

design, so would you like to take charge of it?”

“Of course. I’ll have a meeting with my staff to gather their opinions and then get to work on it right away.”

“Thank you.”

“I must say, your level of enthusiasm when it comes to education is certainly unusual, Lady Iris!” Headmaster Luca said with a curious smile on his face.

“Is it?”

“Certainly. You’re young enough to be my granddaughter, but I have the utmost respect for you.”

“Oh, my. I’m honored to hear that. All I want is to give everyone more power, though.”

“Power?”

“Yes. Knowledge is power. People who are knowledgeable have more opportunities in business and options in their personal lives.”

Ever since I’d regained my memories, I had, perhaps for the first time, become truly grateful for the education I’d received in my past life.

“I want my citizens to have their own thoughts and to have the independence to determine the course of their own lives.”

“I see, I see. Yes, it’s quite wonderful. I’m impressed. I can’t wait to work together with you on this, Lady Iris.”

“Thank you!”

The headmaster smiled warmly at me, and I returned it in kind. The meeting ended smoothly in this manner, but later on, I would regret not spending more time with him. You see, without my say-so, at some point the academy’s motto became “Knowledge is power,” the words blown up into a banner that hung across the entrance of the school.

“I can’t believe he said all that,” Dean said as we left the room.

“Who, Headmaster Luca? Do you know him?”

“I know *of* him. He’s famous! He’s said to be at the forefront of medical

research, and when he resigned as the king's personal physician, he traveled the realm caring for various nobles."

"I see. Well, did he say something that surprised you?"

"Indeed. He's known for having a difficult temperament. So I was startled to hear him praise you so, to say nothing of his quick response to your request."

"Really? I always thought of him as a wonderfully kind old man." I'd liked the headmaster from the moment I met him. I remembered thinking how friendly he was despite his reputation as a prominent figure in his field.

"He's obviously quite fond of you," Dean said with a chuckle, to which I gave him a puzzled look and kept walking.

Now that my meeting with the headmaster was complete, my next stop was the church to talk with Father Rafiel.

"Lady Iris, do you have some kind of deep tie to this church?"

"A church is for prayer, is it not? And I haven't been to one in some time."

Dean looked thoughtful at this response.

"Is it strange for me to go to a church to pray?" I asked.

Now Dean, Lyle, and Dida all had sheepish grins on their faces.

"Of course it's not *strange*, per se, but I just assumed it was your habit to take action about something yourself instead of praying to God about it."

I had to laugh and agree. Perhaps because I was distant with the church since I now had memories of my previous life. I wouldn't have said I was a complete nonbeliever, but I also couldn't deny that I wasn't especially religious.

Still, as a noble, I had been given a religious upbringing and had all the prayers and rituals of the Darryl Church inscribed in my mind, so I had to keep up appearances.

I took the three of them to a small church on the edge of town. Father Rafiel's church was attended to by himself and two other clergymen. It looked old from the outside, but simultaneously, that lent it a certain comforting warmth.

I opened the door and walked up to the altar. A small number of people were inside. The Darryl Church worshiped the goddess Rilü, the mother of all life. All the citizens of Tasmeria believed in this religion, which served as the foundation of all lives, noble and commoner alike. Religion saturated all our customs, whether we performed them at a marriage, the birth of a child, our meals when we said grace, or our funerals upon death.

The church was also supposed to help the less fortunate and offer treatment to the sick, but at present, they didn't often tend to these things. Every organization is vulnerable to the seep of corruption, and the church was no exception, even if they were supposed to be agents of God. But in all reality, the church lacked the funds to provide emergency food distribution.

However, Father Rafiel's church was one of the few churches in the kingdom that *did* have those means. I was donating to their cause under my pseudonym.

I reached the altar and said my prayers, specifically for the stability and safety of the duchy. After I finished, I called over to one of the clergymen. "Is Father Rafiel here?"

"The father is out at the moment," said the clergyman with a suspicious look. "Pardon me, but you are...?"

"Welcome back, Lady Alice!" Father Rafiel appeared, interrupting his peer.

"Ah, Father Rafiel. It's so good to see you again."

"What brings you here today?"

"It's been a while since I saw you last. I'm sorry I didn't arrange a meeting first."

"Not at all. Would you like to come in?" He gestured toward the small room off the main chapel area. It wasn't a parlor, but a desk and chairs were inside.

"Did you go somewhere today?" I asked as we sat.

"Ah, yes. I was making house calls in a nearby village."

"I see. It's just like you to keep yourself busy when there are patients who need you."

"I can't ignore calls for help." He smiled softly at me.

“Excuse me.” The clergyman from earlier entered the room with tea. “Pardon me for my rudeness before. My name is Noryu.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You looked a bit troubled when I asked for Father Rafiel. Did you have something you needed to speak with him about first?”

“No, it’s just there are so many people who come here wanting to talk to Father Rafiel... Young women in particular...” He had a familiar troubled smile on his face.

“Oh, my...”

“As you can see, our Father Rafiel is quite a handsome fellow. His heart is filled with love, and he can’t resist helping those in need. It’s no wonder people fall for his kind soul and good looks, but some of them are quite forward about it.”

I had to chuckle at that. It was true—Father Rafiel was both sweet-natured and sweet on the eyes. I could easily see how young women would fall head over heels for him.



“Hey, now! I told you to stop with that!” Father Rafiel chided Noryu.

I laughed again. “It sounds like you have your hands full with visitors then, Noryu!”

“I’ll manage. Excuse me again for interrupting you.” He smiled wryly and excused himself from the room.

“I’m so sorry about that...” Father Rafiel sighed.

“No worries. It sounds like you have it rough, Father Rafiel.”

“Noryu and the rest of our clergy give me far too much credit. It just pains me that I can’t reciprocate those poor girls’ feelings...”

“Hm? I thought priests of the Darryl Church were permitted to marry.”

“They are, but I’m afraid my life belongs to God. Ah, pardon me, but this is...?”

Ah, that was right. Father Rafiel had never met Dean before. I had come to the church with Lyle and Dida before, though.

“Oh, forgive me for not introducing you sooner. This is Dean. He works with me.”

The two of them exchanged a pleasant greeting.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said Dean.

“Likewise, I’m sure.”

“May I ask you a question, Father Rafiel?”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“Why do you offer medical treatment? I wouldn’t think that unusual for a doctor of course, but...”

“Ah, that...” Father Rafiel smiled sheepishly. “You can be straightforward with me. I know you’re wondering why a priest like me would be out doing such a thing.”

Now it was time for Dean to let out a sheepish chuckle. Father Rafiel was right on the money.

“Once, it was the church’s responsibility to protect the people,” said Father

Rafiel. “We fed, clothed, and cared for them when they fell ill, and we took in children whose parents had died. Once the churches were united under the kingdom’s power and we began to receive funds from the crown, that shouldn’t have changed. I’m not sure when it did, but...at some point, the priests began using the crown’s money to support themselves. The citizens became second in their hearts, and they protected themselves first.”

A sad look came over Father Rafiel’s face. “I’m embarrassed to say that I don’t blame you for your surprise. These days, the Darryl Church doesn’t stand for what it should. The main church has forgotten our teachings and been blinded by riches, spending all their time involved with the war between political factions.”

“Are you really sure you should be talking to us about that, Father?”

“Well, it’s the truth. I was once a central figure in the main church. But every day, I wondered what I was doing. The things I longed for were destroyed. I spent too much time in reality to dream. I couldn’t let down my defenses for even a moment or I’d be sucked into the power struggle and lose sight of myself. I started to despise who I’d become and fled here to escape. Now I do things in the way I want to. I can breathe easily.” As he spoke, he wore a clear, genuine smile.

“So do you view the things you’re doing now as the true purpose of the Darryl Church?” asked Dean.

“Well, that’s not for me to judge. It’s more that I became a priest so I could be more like a certain nun.” Father Rafiel shrugged.

“How do you mean?”

“This nun was a wonderful person. She took in a poor runaway like myself and gave me an education, and she took care of me when I was sick. As a young boy, I saw her as a true hero. I told her, ‘I want to be like you when I grow up.’ If she hadn’t recommended I join the church, I probably would’ve stayed by her side forever.”

“She does sound like a wonderful person,” I said. “I would love to meet her.”

“Unfortunately, that’s not possible. She has already gone to be with God.”

“Oh, I’m sorry...”

“Speaking of, you’re from a family of merchants, are you not? Have you ever met Duke Armelia’s daughter?”

This sudden question made my heart skip a beat. Had Father Rafiel discovered my identity?

“No, not even once...”

I glanced at Dean, and I saw the caution in his eyes. I didn’t think his concern was about Father Rafiel uncovering my identity, but more so a suspicion as to why a priest would want to meet someone who held so much power. Dean couldn’t help but view the church and clergymen with a certain amount of shrewdness.

“I see.” Father Rafiel let out a disappointed sigh.

I decided to just come right out and ask him. “Why do you look so disappointed?”

“It’s nothing. I was just thinking if your family had connections to her, I would love to meet her sometime. Forgive me for being so forward.”

“But why do you want that?”

“Because I see in her the same will I saw in that nun whom I respected so much. After the sister died, the duke’s daughter established that new orphanage. They’ve taken in the children the nun who raised me had looked after. So, well, I’ve always wanted to meet that woman and thank her.”

The orphanage! I thought with surprise, trying very hard not to let it show on my face. “Oh, my. Have you been to the new orphanage?”

“No, actually. It embarrasses me to say that I didn’t know about the orphanage until the main church allowed me to come back to Armelia. I’ve been in contact with Mina, the woman who works there, but she always worries about me. I only learned of the situation from her letters. So I have no right to go see any of them.”

“Oh, don’t say that. You should go visit them. I don’t know how Mina or the children feel, but I understand why you’ve shied away. But the more you run

from a person, the less you understand how they feel.”

At first Father Rafiel didn't seem to understand my objection, but once I finished, he smiled sheepishly at me. “You've got me. At this point, I'm wondering who the real priest is between us.”

“Ha ha ha. I'm sorry if I sounded patronizing. It's just, if you go to the orphanage, perhaps you'll meet the duke's daughter...if you're lucky. I've heard she visits there from time to time.”

“Thank you. You're right. I'll have to muster up the courage to go sometime soon.” At last, Father Rafiel looked a bit relieved.

Chapter 9:

The Duke's Daughter and the Scandal

IT HAD ALREADY BEEN several weeks since I'd gone to town. After we came home, Tanya and the rest of the servants were quite cross with me, but the trip had been incredibly beneficial.

Afterward, we worked on reinforcing the duchy's borders. Not only did merchants travel back and forth across our borders at a more or less constant rate, but many citizens of other domains wished to move here. Since border security was a new endeavor, it took quite some time to establish, and there were numerous snarls to work through. We just had to untangle them as they came.

My first priority was the safety of the citizens, but in the meantime, I was still preparing to establish the trade school. I'd received a letter from Headmaster Luca telling me he had finished revamping the academy curriculum and now all they had to do was implement it. He had also written up a plan for the trade school curriculum.

In addition, we established the private service-oriented school that would be funded by the Azuta Corporation. The first few years would be crucial. I wanted all our institutes of higher learning to make a name for themselves from the start.

With all that on my plate, I headed for a table in the library, carrying a stack of books and papers. Even though my workload had increased, this stack was nothing compared to what I'd met when I first returned to Armelia. After all, these days you could see the floor of my office.

However, the sound of the library door bursting violently open ruined the peaceful silence. The cause of the noise was Sebastian and Tanya.

"My lady! There's trouble!"

"What in the world is going on?" I heard the tension in my voice. But of course I was tense—only something truly bad could send those two into a

panic.

“The Darryl Church has resolved to excommunicate you!” Sebastian informed me breathlessly.

I was speechless for a moment.

“What did you say?” And then I let out a noise very closely resembling a scream. All the blood drained from my face and I felt faint. My heart pounded wildly.

The Darryl Church was Tasmeria’s official religion. Every citizen followed its teachings. In other words, the church and its clergymen were seen as representatives of God and carried enormous power throughout the kingdom—to a degree, even beyond that of the nobles. As proof of that influence, the children of Darryl Church clergymen attended the academies that had once been reserved solely for children of the peerage.

To be expelled from the Darryl Church was to no longer be recognized as a true believer. It was synonymous with exile.

Everyone in this kingdom followed the Darryl Church. Those who didn’t were seen as heretics. Worse, those actively expelled from the church were seen as sinners and treated to every imaginable abuse. Not only would it be unimaginably shameful for the daughter of a duke to fall to such depths, it simply *could not* happen.

With excommunication, I would lose all the trust and personal connections I’d built. Speaking in terms of my past life, the only thing I could compare it to was the Humiliation of Canossa. Just imagining the consequences of this made my head ache.

“Why?” I asked.

“You destroyed a church without permission. And the destruction of a house of worship is an act against God. It is unforgivable.”

“Destroyed a church? Do you mean during the land readjustment?”

I had given orders for a church to be torn down, yes—specifically the old orphanage where Mina had lived with the orphans. But I’d had it destroyed

because it was no longer being used as a church and the land no longer belonged to anyone. Instead, I had plans to build a bigger church elsewhere.

I knew what this was in truth—an attack against House Armelia. I wondered if Van, the pope’s son, had anything to do with it. Or maybe the pope himself? Or someone else in the second prince’s faction?

I just couldn’t believe they’d resorted to such a horrible maneuver.

“I’ll send the church a formal apology and a copy of my plans for building the new church. I *didn’t* destroy it—I’m rebuilding and relocating it.”

The responsible parties didn’t matter right now. I mean, they did matter, but they weren’t a priority. I had to do something to prevent myself from being excommunicated before I could start searching for the culprit.

I couldn’t bring these troubles to my parents’ doorstep, and of course I didn’t want to frighten my citizens. And there was no telling what damage this news might do to my company.

“Sebastian, prepare the missive to the church at once.”

“Yes, my lady.” Sebastian bowed and rushed out of the room.

“And what do you have to tell me, Tanya?” At this point, nothing would surprise me. Although, I didn’t think anything could be worse than being declared a heretic.

“The domain to our north, Medinus, has declared they are blockading our trade route.”

“What?!”

The northward road that cut through Medinus was the main trade route from Armelia to the capital. Meanwhile, if you wished to leave to the east, you would run into the sea, and to the west, you would have to cross treacherous mountains. Taking the southern route meant an incredible detour, if you wanted to reach the capital. Thus, we used that northern route for a great deal of our trade.

“Why?” I demanded.

Medinus was a relatively small domain, and its northern half was all

mountainous terrain. They'd also put a considerable amount of effort into developing their housing and tourism, so they had little free land. They therefore relied on the resources they obtained from Armelia through trade. Furthermore, as far as I understood it, House Medinus had remained neutral in the political conflict. That was why I had let my guard down with them.

"They wish to cut ties with a governor branded a sinner," said Tanya. "And they wish to protect the value of their domain's agriculture."

"What agriculture?" I countered. "Their population is so large, they can't afford to sell anything they grow!"

There was simply no way they could feed all those people on their own. That meant they had received a better deal from somewhere else. I saw the fingerprints of the second prince's faction's all over this one.

Still...

"I can't believe this is happening all at the same time..."

This blockade from a neighboring domain would have been trouble enough. But I just knew the second prince's faction had worked to ensure these things happened simultaneously. And this wouldn't just affect our trade with the capital. It would impact all the ventures I was trying to develop throughout the rest of the kingdom. I had been pursuing these in order to diversify our income, so we wouldn't be solely reliant on the capital. If they raised tariffs on imports now, it would put a serious dent in our profits.

"Rehme, how many days would it add to our trade route if we sent our merchants through the south? And how much added cost? Once you've found out, report back to me. And Tanya, summon Moneda and Sei at once."

After I penned the formal apology to the church, I needed to talk to Sebastian and the rest of my council.

"Yes, my lady." Tanya turned and left the room. I followed her. I was so dizzy, I almost stumbled and fell, but I managed to stay upright. This was no time to lose it. The way back to my study felt, for some reason, incredibly long. I kept wishing I would wake up to learn this had been nothing more than a bad dream.

But the tears running down my cheeks and the cold sweat running down my

back proved that it was not. At any rate, I had to hurry.

My head was heavy. I had a throbbing headache—there were just so many things to think about. I pressed a hand to my temple as I flipped through the documents. After I received the notice of my excommunication, I'd sent off a letter of vindication that Sebastian and I had worked on together. The letter explained that the old church's land had already been sold and that the building on the property had been old, run-down, and in need of serious repairs. I also explained that I held the deed and that I had not repaired the church because I was instead going to rebuild it on a separate piece of land.

Despite all this, the church had not rescinded my excommunication.

"Talk about making me a scapegoat..."

Sebastian nodded. "Indeed. I tried to locate the clergyman who sold the church but to no avail. He might have been cut loose. The same goes for the one with whom we exchanged forms when you tore down the old church. Gone without a trace. The church also has special privileges, so there's a limit to the amount of information we're able to request as a duchy. I think it will be difficult to investigate this matter any further."

"This could all be solved if we could just track down those clergymen."

But we couldn't exactly ask the church for a list of all their members. However, it was good that we'd at least established these individuals were nowhere to be found.

"Well? How are things within the duchy?" I asked.

"It's only been a few days, but the people are expressing their anxiety."

"I can't say I'm surprised. What about the officials?"

"The same. A handful have either resigned or are taking leaves of absence. But thanks to the overwhelming majority being so devoted to their obligations, enough have stayed on to maintain the status quo."

That didn't surprise me. To anyone outside of my inner circle, it looked like I had destroyed a church without permission, which was a sin against holy

ground. I couldn't blame them if they thought I had abused my position and acted for my own benefit.

"Trade has steeply declined. The impact across the duchy is substantial."

Following Medinus's declaration of a blockade, other domains belonging to the second prince's faction had either followed suit or imposed higher tariffs in order to hamper our business in their territories. Their reasoning was always the same.

Consequently, the ventures I had been building elsewhere were taking huge losses, all for being associated with Armelia. If I couldn't take care of this quickly, I wouldn't be surprised if they all turned their backs on me.

It went without saying that the Azuta Corporation was suffering, too. Everyone who had wanted to join our private membership now saw me as a sinner. I expect that soon, some—if not all—of them would begin speaking out against me.

The only thing I could do to counteract our losses was raise sales tax on the goods yet to be shipped. Even though some of the noble clients who loved our products complained about the price increases, they hadn't yet made any public comments about my situation.

The same couldn't be said about the citizens, though. Even before the price increase, it had been clear in a matter of days that sales had slowed. As if that wasn't bad enough, our store employees were dropping like flies in the capital and in other domains. In other words, production had fallen along with sales.

On top of that, competitors who produced goods similar to ours were thriving. That had happened before, but now it was because people who had left the Azuta Corporation had gone to work for them. By the end of this, countless customers would likely decide they preferred those similar products over ones made by a company whose president had been excommunicated.

"I look terrible..." I murmured as I looked in the mirror. I had dark circles under my eyes, my hair was a proper mess, and my skin was dull. The part of myself that had lived in Japan scoffed at the idea of excommunication, but in all reality, the church in this world had unbelievable influence. They represented God; compared to them, the vaunted name of a mere noble house meant

nothing.

The organization of the church itself couldn't interfere directly with a domain that showed no aggression toward the rest of the realm. It was, in other words, difficult to reach the position I had managed to. But I had done so, and I was now seen as a sinner.

The second prince's faction was also using my excommunication as an excuse to undermine my father. My mother was refraining from attending any events. Even the queen dowager couldn't make public moves in my support, because she couldn't ever be seen as defying the church. There wasn't much of anything she could do to help me.

I looked up at the ceiling. Ahh, my head really did feel so heavy. I had a feeling I'd be horrifically dizzy if I tried to stand up. It had only been a few days, but that was enough. I'd barely slept and I spent every waking moment trying to stay abreast of the situation and figure any way out of it. Since this was also a battle against time, the past few days had been extraordinarily stressful.

I looked back down. I definitely felt like I was having trouble focusing my eyes. But I just had to hang in there a little while longer. Nevertheless, a creeping doubt cast a dark shadow on my heart—that all my efforts would be in vain. The enemy I faced was just too powerful. If only I'd had more time to prepare... But I hadn't.

“Are you all right, my lady?”

Sebastian and Sei, with help from Rehme, were seeing to various things around the duchy and with the corporation. Tanya had gone to the capital to look into the church, and Lyle and Dida were ensuring our border security. Moneda was dealing with the bank and the merchant guild. The only one of my servants left by my side was Merida.

She frowned as soon as she saw me.

“Do I look all right?” The muscles in my face were exhausted, but I managed a self-deprecating smile.

“Forgive me. I thought you might be feeling tired, so I brought you some chocolate and tea.”

“Thank you.” I took a bite of the chocolate. Goodness, it was so delicious. It immediately melted away some of the fatigue. “Hey, Merida? I bet you’re getting a ton of invitations to work elsewhere, aren’t you?”

“Yes, well, only because I’ve been going around to all the different cafés.” She laughed. Hearing the warmth in her voice was so comforting.

“Probably some with exceptional offers too, no?”

She gave me a surprised look for a moment and then laughed again. “Even if someone begged me to join them, I owe everything I’ve accomplished to you, my lady. I simply have no interest in leaving your side.”

“I see...”

“Not to mention that I hardly think it’s over for you yet, my lady,” she said with a grin.

“Well, I hope I don’t let you down, Merida.”

Almost everything was arranged—only one thing was still missing. I wouldn’t let things end for me like this. I couldn’t. I had to do everything in my power, leaving no potential escape route unexplored. Otherwise, they would catch me, or they would keep coming for me until they did. I had to figure out how to find absolution.

“I’ll excuse myself now, my lady.”

I had been so lost in thought that I forgot Merida was still with me. As she left, someone else came into the room.

“Dean!” I was utterly shocked to see him. “Wh-what are you doing here?”

“I came to help you.”

“Help me? Even knowing my situation?”

As I said, I expected people to turn their backs on me, and I didn’t begrudge them for it; I was now viewed as a sinner. I certainly couldn’t believe anyone would choose to return to my side having already left it. In the modern legal terms of my past life, it would have been the equivalent of aiding and abetting a convicted criminal. A number of people had already quit the Azuta Corporation, and I’d received letters from officials across the duchy requesting meetings so

that they could ask in person why I had not resigned my post.

“Yes, of course,” said Dean. “That situation is why I came.”

“To lend aid to a sinner? The Darryl Church may well retaliate against you for it. Why would you take that risk? I just don’t understand!” Maybe it was because I was exhausted, but I realized my tone of voice was far harsher than usual. It had been with Merida as well, now that I thought about it. Yet even though I was aware of it, I couldn’t stop.

“Well, I’ve done it. Don’t you remember what I told you? I already belong to you. If I can’t help you during your time of need, when can I?” He said this as if it were the most natural thing in the whole world, and for a moment, I was completely speechless.

“But...”

“I’m going to help you, and in order to do that, I’ve brought you just what you’ve been hunting for.”

With those words, he handed me something—something I had been desperately searching for and that I had feared I might never actually get my hands on. It was the final piece of my salvation. I would never have imagined Dean being the one to give it to me.

I swiftly mastered my surprise. Yet I was still moved beyond words.

“So what’s your plan?” he asked with a grin.

Impish! He knew exactly what I intended to do.

“Exactly what you think it is,” I said primly. “But now that you’ve given me this, we have everything we need to implement it.”

“I’m glad to hear that. When will you have the opening ceremony?”

“You’re well connected, aren’t you? I can’t believe you heard about that already.”

“It’s caused quite a stir in the capital. I couldn’t help but overhear it.”

“Well, it’s tomorrow. More importantly, Dean, I can’t believe this—it must have taken such effort. And you must have predicted what I was planning.”

At my prompting, Dean provided an overview of what he thought I was up to. Aside from a few minor miscalculations, he nailed it. I supposed that, as he was involved in the governmental affairs of Armelia, he had been able to glean some clues from what he knew had happened with the orphanage and the news of my excommunication. He'd also heard a few key rumors, and between all that, he had guessed my plan.

"Now, given all that, I've only this to say—tell me you aren't planning on stepping out onto tomorrow's battlefield looking like that."

"Looking like what?" I asked.

"I'm sure you know what I mean. You look dreadful."

Dreadful? Well, he certainly wasn't mincing words. But since I'd just thought more or less the same thing, I couldn't deny it, either.

"I'm sure the others have noticed as well, but they're too worried to say anything. So I will." Dean looked me in the eyes. "When I heard what was happening to you—and even before, when I worked at your side—there was something I couldn't help but wonder. After the second prince broke your engagement, you threw yourself into your work for the citizens. Now, even with this new catastrophe...you've never once shed any tears, nor expressed the least weakness, nor even complained. You've swallowed down every last emotion and kept moving ever forward. It makes me wonder how in the world you could be so strong."

"Strong...? I've never thought I was strong. Not even once." Did not crying make me so? If it did, whose strength was it? Mine or...mine? Both of my selves were so entangled with each other that I couldn't be sure.

"You haven't? Even though you've been so extraordinarily able to cut yourself off from your emotions?"

Stop. Don't keep asking me this, I thought, biting my lip. The words that came out of my mouth were far colder, far harsher than I expected. "Crying won't solve anything."

"Perhaps not. But it seems to me that continuing to bottle your emotions will soon leave you in a precarious position. That much is already plainly apparent

on your face.”

I...I couldn't take it anymore. All those emotions I'd been suppressing exploded.

“Then what would you have me do, Dean?! Wail and cry out for someone, anyone to help me? Will weeping and whining about my problems solve any of them? Of course not!”

I knew I was taking my feelings out on him, but I couldn't stop. I grabbed a handful of his shirt. He didn't even look surprised. He only looked down at me.

“I can't even take a moment to cry! I couldn't even when Edward abandoned me! Yes, it felt horrible! It felt so horrible and hurt so much that all I wanted to do was scream and sob!”

After Edward broke our engagement, my feelings for him had certainly cooled. I was no longer in love with him, no. That didn't mean I'd felt nothing. I had been so anxious about what the future might bring. I had been frustrated, and I'd hated him so much. But if I had broken down to keen about it, I would have been disowned. *Imprisoned*. So I hadn't cried, because I couldn't. Instead, I'd had to rack my brain and come up with a way to negotiate with my father. Even when I successfully returned to the duchy, I had been consumed with restless anxiety.

I had the memories of my past life, but I'd been nothing more than a typical office worker back then. I'd never worked in government before, and again and again, I found myself in a position where I had no idea what I was doing and could only hope I was doing the right thing.

“And now excommunication? *Why*? How dare they! Why should I have to accept such a ridiculous sentence?!” Tears started streaming down my face. “I'm so upset. I'm so upset, I don't even know what to do! Why? Why? That's all I keep thinking! It hurts so terribly, I just want to run away. All I want to do is scream and cry! Why?!”

I quickly turned my face away to try to hide my tears, but I couldn't stop crying, so the tears just spilled onto the floor.

“My weakness makes my heart ache. We've come so far, and the citizens, and

the people around me, they've made so much progress. But I ruined everything for them. I feel so utterly pathetic and so, so sorry that any of this happened. It *hurts.*"

My feelings were such a mess that I was just rambling at this point, my words a disconnected jumble. I just started saying everything I felt without even trying to sort through it first.

"And I'm supposed to cry and ask for help? In that case, it would be better for all involved if I just shut myself away somewhere to get out of everyone's way. But even that would cause too many problems for my family. So I can't just run away. I can't take back the fact that I've been branded a sinner."

Right... What was the point in weeping and running away? Even if I dismissed myself from the Azuta Corporation and left Armelia, it wouldn't remove the stain of my existence. Excommunication couldn't be so easily dismissed. There was no taking it back. Not unless the church itself rescinded it.

"I'm 'trying to be strong,' so *that's* why I'm not crying? No. I don't cry because there's no use in crying. And because I'm afraid that if I do, I'll exhaust everyone's goodwill. That's why I don't cry!"

I'd already caused so much trouble for everyone. I couldn't break down and risk losing their affection, too. Even though I knew they weren't the type of people who would hate me for such a thing, I couldn't shake the fear and the doubt.

"I'm not strong. I only want people to think I am. But I'm such a pathetic human being, I can't even accomplish that."

Then I started full-on sobbing. I fell against Dean's chest, still clutching a fistful of his shirt, and wept. I felt him tenderly wrap his arms around me. It was so warm. On one hand, I was crying my heart out, and on the other hand, my common sense kept begging me, "Get away!" It was telling me not to whimper and cling to him, not to show him my weakness. Until now, my heart had been protected by an impenetrable fortress. If I let him through those walls...and if he betrayed me...there would be no coming back from that.

If I was ever going to be free from Dean, I had to push him away now.

And yet, impulsively, I ignored all reason and clung to his warmth.

It was pathetic.

It was foolish.

I hadn't learned a thing, not even after how I had suffered before. Yet the truth was that his warmth comforted me.

It was the first time I had really cried since I'd regained the memories of my past life. All of those conflicting emotions had now surfaced.

Then Dean spoke. His words were frank, his voice serious.

"Your strength is beautiful. But I don't want you to push yourself. None of us do. Perhaps it's only natural that you're hesitant to show us your vulnerability after what you endured and because of your present position. But your refusal to share your pain with those closest to you only makes them worry.

"And I'm one of those people. You looked so frail when I came into this room. It was like you might at any moment disappear. It frightened me to see you like that. I know words won't be enough to reassure you. So I'm going to keep reassuring you through my actions. Now stop swallowing your troubles and keeping them all to yourself."



It felt like being lectured by Father. But I was painfully aware of what he meant.

That night, after crying so hard for the first time in so long—or perhaps harder than I ever had—I slept deeply. Dean promised me he would help me with my final preparations, and I gratefully accepted the assistance so I could rest.

The following morning, I stood in front of the mirror and took myself in. My eyes were still a little red from all the tears, but I looked so much more at ease.

“I’m sorry for asking this of you, Father Rafiel and Mina...”

“N-not at all! I did what anyone would’ve done, Governor...”

I was so grateful to the both of them. Immediately after I’d received notice of my excommunication, I’d summoned both of them to see me. I had done so as part of an effort to keep the citizens calm in the wake of what was about to happen. Neither of them had had any idea that I was actually Duke Armelia’s daughter, so at first, they had both been quite stunned—especially Father Rafiel, who had expressed such desire to meet the duke’s daughter.

I felt bad, honestly, and also a little awkward.

Obviously, Father Rafiel had heard about the excommunication, since he was affiliated with the church. He immediately used his connections to investigate how we might get the excommunication rescinded. I appreciated it so much. When I’d explained everything to Mina, she had been just beside herself. They each thought this situation was somehow all their fault. I’d expected that reaction and felt absolutely terrible for having to involve them at all.

“The reason I asked you here today is likely obvious. I need a favor from each of you.”

“O-of course. What is it? I’ll do anything I can. Anything...” Father Rafiel’s gaze sharpened, but I couldn’t back down now.

“I hate to dredge up painful memories...but, Mina, I would like you to tell people what really happened when the church was sold. And make a show of it, if you would. Essentially, I need you to explain that the holy church where you

lived was sold to people involved in human trafficking, but you refused to leave, at which point the traffickers harassed you endlessly. After I learned of your situation, I had the traffickers arrested, but due to the harassment, the church had fallen to ruin, so I decided to rebuild it in a safer location. Tell them that although the new church hasn't yet been opened to the public, there will be a grand reopening soon. And tell them that I will be there for it."

Mina stared at me curiously. "That's what you want us to say?"

"Yes. I'm sure people will look at you like you have two heads. In fact, I'm high positive they will. They may doubt you or accuse you of lying, but I still want you to tell the truth to as many people as you can."

"Of course I will! I'll start spreading the word right away! I'll go to every corner of the duchy to tell your story!"

With Mina's responsibility squared away, I let Tanya show her out.

"You've since gone to the orphanage, yes?" I asked Father Rafiel.

"I have. Thank you so much for encouraging me, Lady Iris." He gave me a wry smile. "But right now I'm far more concerned about you."

"Yes...I have a favor to ask of you, too."

"Well, it will depend on what it is, of course. But I'll do everything I can. I do need to tell you something first, though."

"What is it?"

"My connections in the capital have cut ties with me. Not only that, but it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say they've painted a bit of a target on my back."

"Because you're the priest of Armelia's main church?"

"No, because they now know of my connections to the orphanage."

"But how?"

"I suspect Noryu was behind it."

"Noryu? Ah, that other clergyman at your church?"

"Yes. Apparently, he's been reporting on me to the head church this whole

time. I confirmed as much before my contacts cut me off, and I have physical proof as well.”

“I see. Well, there’s only one thing I have to ask of you. But I’d rather Noryu didn’t know about it. I certainly don’t want him interfering.”

“Shall I send him elsewhere for a while? He does answer to me, so it wouldn’t seem especially suspicious if I sent him on an errand.”

“That’s a good idea. Let’s have the academy play along, too. Although, Father Rafiel, you’re a priest—are you sure it’s all right for you to be so sly?”

“What do you mean? I served at the main branch of the Darryl Church for quite a long time. I wouldn’t have survived without a bit of my own cunning.”

“Well, then. How interesting.”

I went ahead and asked him my favor. He agreed, just as Mina had.

A mere ten days after, the rumors had spread like wildfire to the farthest reaches of Armelia. Of course, they weren’t all positive. Some came from those who doubted the veracity of Mina’s story, and at other times, her story was twisted along the way. But I’d planted the seed, and interest in the newly rebuilt church was growing among the people.

I reflected upon it all as I approached that brand-new structure in a carriage. Mina sat across from me.

“Thank you so much,” I said to her. “But please remember, I’m only the acting governor.”

“O-oh, right.”

“And please don’t tell the children about me. I don’t want them calling me Lady Iris while we’re playing. It would make me feel too distant from them—and that would be far too sad.”

“You’re going to come back?”

“Of course I am. I promised I’d help the children with their studies. And I have all manner of new picture books and other such for them.”

“Thank you so much, Lady Iris. I’m sure the children will be thrilled!”

“I’m glad. I suppose I’ll have to hurry up and take care of this so I can go visit them, then,” I said as I got out of the carriage.

It was the day we’d been waiting for. The new church was complete, and the opening ceremony awaited us. Lyle, Dida, and Tanya would serve as my bodyguards while I participated.

The new church rose before me. Even though it was supposed to be a sacred place, I felt something like a hero striding into the castle of a wicked king. Perhaps that was a bit of an exaggeration. At any rate, I had a responsibility—I needed to bring ease to the souls of my citizens.

Chapter 10:

The Duke's Daughter Counterattacks

TWILIGHT HAD FALLEN. Usually, at this time, the taverns were packed, but instead, the people had gathered outside a church. The brand-new structure looked dim in the growing darkness, but that only contributed to its solemnity.

In attendance were the presidents of famous companies, town mayors, and other influential people, as well as a sea of ordinary citizens. Most of the crowd were those who lived in Armelia's capital.

Even though the new church's chapel was exceptionally large, it was packed to the brim. All the pews were filled, and people stood in every free inch of space, spilling out the doors.

They had all felt terribly anxious upon hearing their governor had been excommunicated. Many had likely come in hopes of having those fears assuaged. They had also come because of the rumors, the ones that said their governor had defied the church in order to protect orphans—the very ones now under the care of the new state orphanage. That orphanage was surprisingly well known throughout the capital, and its matron was seen as a credible source. At the same time, the citizens had a hard time understanding why the governor and the church had fought about them at all.

At last, the priest appeared and approached the altar. Once he took his place, the pipe organ began to play a hymn. Its beautiful song lifted the people's hearts.

The priest offered his prayers up to God and entreated everyone to join him. Then he began his sermon.

"God instructs us to love one another. Humans are weak creatures. We cannot live alone. But when you treat your fellow citizens with love, you may join hands with them to build a better world. That is why God urges us to forge connections with one another."

Though his voice was soft, his words echoed throughout the church.

“Yet though we ought to love one another, we must not turn a blind eye when we witness wrongdoing. To love one another and to rely on one another are two separate things. When you see an injustice, you must have the courage to set it right.”

A murmur washed through the church. *“You must set it right.”* Was he talking about the duke’s daughter?

“We must look at the world with a clear heart. What is wrong? What is right? Extend your hands to those who do right, even if they have been ostracized by others. This I bring to you from God’s teachings, from which love overflows, and so shall we pray, filled with righteous light.”

Once the priest finished his sermon, he left the altar. It seemed the opening ceremony had ended. Then a woman stood and approached the altar. She wore a pure-white dress, although it was so simple, it looked more akin to the vestments of the church rather than a dress. Despite these modest clothes, she was so beautiful that no one could take their eyes off her.

“Thank you so much for participating in the opening ceremony today.” Her voice was clear, and she spoke with perfect gratitude.

People began whispering, “Who is that?” If you listened carefully, you could hear some gasping a name: “Alice!”

The woman continued, answering the unspoken question. “My name is Iris. Iris Lana Armelia. I am Duke Armelia’s daughter and the current acting governor of this duchy.”

The murmuring grew louder, not only because the acting governor was present, but because she had been branded a sinner.

“Please listen, my people. I’m sure you’re wondering why I’m here. In short, the priest gave me permission to attend, so I did. And as he said in his captivating sermon... I ask only that you listen to me with clear hearts and decide for yourselves whether I am right or wrong.”

Her clarion voice suited the atmosphere. She conducted herself with dignity, and the confused shouts trailed off. Many people still whispered among themselves, however.

“Armelia is so blessed. Our people follow God’s teachings and treat each other with love. But at times, there are those whom that love doesn’t reach, and there are people who live in unfortunate circumstances.”

Iris folded her hands as if in prayer. “I met such people not long ago. They were children who were fortunate enough to have met a compassionate nun and lived happily in an orphanage established inside of a church in our own capital. Then the sister passed away and the land upon which the church stood was sold. The orphans no longer had a place to stay and were mistreated by the heartless actions of those who bought the land. Even though they were innocents, they were subjected to the cruelest of actions. Are there any here who have heard this tale?”

A few people spoke up. Yes, they’d heard of it.

“My family did not see what had happened, and that was our sin. We are responsible for protecting our citizens.” As Iris spoke, a single tear streaked down her face. That exquisite girl in her simple dress shedding tears for her people: it was a beautiful sight indeed.

“We cannot make the same mistake. House Armelia is meant to protect you, all of you. Our first step toward that goal is this new church. It will be a place to keep the children safe. It will also be a symbol of our commitment to you and your bright future. I’ve been told my sin was tearing down that old church. But who did I sin against? Should I have turned a blind eye on the citizens, who it is my duty to serve? Should I have abandoned a church already fallen to ruin and let it decay even further? Would that have been right?”

Her voice grew more and more emotional. Everyone listening was swept up in that emotion. If she was telling the truth, who *were* the real sinners here?

“I am a devout follower of the Darryl Church. But I am also the governor of Armelia, tasked with serving my citizens. God watches over and protects us, but we have free will and it is our obligation to act. We cannot only hope that happiness will rain down from the sky. Everything depends on our actions and our will. Those who think evil is unavoidable are practicing evil themselves. Those who do not resist evil are enabling it.

“Those of you who just admitted you knew what was happening to those

children—what did you do to help them? Did you speak up and call on anyone to save them? My two hands are small, and I have but two eyes and two ears. Yet I have officials who support my efforts, and I have all of you here. If you call, I will answer. If I find the weak, I shall protect them. If they cry out from pain or danger, I shall help them. It is my utmost desire to do everything in my power to ensure every last citizen of Armelia lives a blessed life. But I need your help.”

One person began to clap. Then another, and another, and suddenly the entire room was filled with applause. It came from outside the church as well.

If the citizens of Armelia followed the duke’s daughter, their lives would be rich and full. She would protect them, no matter who threatened them.

Such were their thoughts. They didn’t question the basis of that belief. They were so moved, they didn’t care why. They blindly thought it, swept up in her energy and in the atmosphere of the new church.

“God bless you,” the priest said to Iris. She bowed to him, accepting his blessing.

Then she turned back to the crowd and bowed toward them once more.

Propaganda, noun, information used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view.

The speech I’d just given was exactly that. I’d used the rumors Mina had spread to get people to sympathize with me and used the teachings of the church to turn my plight into a question of morality.

One of the most reviled men in my old world’s history once said that the key to propaganda is appealing to people’s emotions. The most effective way to popularize a point of view is to keep the dogma simple and find slogans that can drive the movement forward and be repeated over and over, until every last person understands its meaning.

Had I accomplished my end? That had been the first speech I’d ever given in my life. I’d just have to hope it was a success. They’d applauded, after all. I’d also helped myself build an atmosphere by scheduling the ceremony at twilight, when the dim lighting would accentuate the solemnity of the event.

“That was a moving sermon, Father Rafiel. Please continue taking care of the orphanage.”

The favor I’d asked of him that day I summoned him had been to become the priest of the new church and the director of the orphanage.

“Of course. I’ll do my very best,” he said. “Your speech was also quite moving.”

“Thank you.”

“By the way, how’s Noryu faring?”

“I let him go. He seemed relieved.”

Father Rafiel had sent Noryu on an errand the day after I met with him and Mina. The errand had been to deliver medicine to a town near the capital. Father Rafiel had often taken care of this delivery himself, occasionally with Noryu’s help, so it hadn’t raised the man’s suspicions. We had, however, sent someone to follow Noryu to keep him busy.

First, my agent had been responsible for causing a disturbance on the road. A carriage breakdown or a blocked road or something like that. Anything that would delay Noryu’s progress from the capital. When he finally arrived, it turned out that a contagious illness was ravaging the town; the residents were quarantined and not allowed to leave, so as not to spread it.

Of course, there hadn’t actually been an illness. But since the residents of the town were indebted to Father Rafiel, they had readily agreed to the charade, and the attending doctor had been played by Headmaster Luca. The headmaster had told Noryu that, as he had been in contact with an infected person, he would also have to enter quarantine. Apparently, Noryu had been very worried that he would fall ill.

Then, of course, there had been more disruptions on the way home.

All in all, Noryu had been out of town the entire time we planned this ceremony, so he had been unable to interfere.

I had strengthened my position in Armelia, so I could now afford to leave it for a while. Thus, I headed for the capital. I had to take care of this problem at its

source.

Still, my doubts continued to swirl in my head. The only reason I had been able to give that speech with any confidence was because of Dean—and because of the two documents he'd helped me secure, which I'd kept close to my heart ever since. These documents were the final piece of the puzzle that I had been searching for, and it was thanks to them that I had been able to make Father Rafiel the new priest.

Until Dean gave them to me, I'd wondered how in the world I could get hold of them—I'd even considered asking my mother or even the queen dowager for help. How *had* he acquired them?

"Are you all right, my lady?" Lyle asked in a concerned tone, interrupting my thoughts.

"I-I'm fine."

"We can rest in a little while. Please hang on until then."

We were on our way to the capital. Since speed was of the essence, we weren't taking a carriage and I was on horseback instead. I didn't know how to ride, so Lyle was holding the reins. I'd thought I'd be fine since I'd put up with the intensity of our trip home, but that had been naive. I'd had no idea riding was such a bumpy affair. I missed solid ground.

Dida, Lyle, Tanya, and my family's other guards were with me. Dean had other affairs in need of tending and had needed to leave partway through the journey. He would meet up with us when he finished. In other words, everyone else was a skilled rider, so I was the one holding us back. But the sacrifice was worth it; we made the trip in record time.

Once we arrived in the capital, I somehow managed to walk into my family's home even though my legs felt like jelly.

"Welcome home, my lady."

The servants greeted me and ushered me inside the foyer, where my family awaited.

"I-I'm home. Father, Mother, Berne... I'm so sorry for all the trouble I've

caused.” That was the best I could do at that moment. I still felt like I was moving and was overwhelmed with vertigo.

Father immediately noticed something was wrong and gave me a concerned look. “You got here awfully quickly. Are you all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine...”

“You need to rest.”

“O-okay...”

I did as I was told and promptly slept for a few hours. When I woke up, Elulu showed me to another room—the one where we normally had tea. But the air wasn’t so relaxed today. My family was already seated, and so I took the remaining empty chair.

“As I said before, I’m incredibly sorry about all the trouble I caused,” I apologized.

“Please, don’t worry. None of us could have imagined that Darryl Church would go to such lengths,” Father said.

“But...”

“Your father’s right. You stand falsely accused,” Mother agreed.

Their warm words made a lump form in my throat.

“All your preparations for the inquiry are complete,” Father said. “The queen dowager received your information with a good deal of enthusiasm. The church aggressed against you first, so there’s no need to hold back. I want you to give this your all.”

“I will,” I promised. “By the way, Mother. Dean gave me a letter for you.”

“Oh, my. From Dean? Let me see it, dear.” My mother looked quite intrigued as I passed her the envelope, and she opened it on the spot. She giggled softly when she was finished reading it.

“What did he say?”

“Oh, he apologized for using my name without permission. Apparently, that’s how he got his hands on those items you needed—the ones from the church.”

“He did? I’m sure that helped,” said Berne. “I hear the church is in dire straits because attendance is down after you stopped going to their charity balls, Mother.”

And if no one was showing up, the church was sorely wanting for donations. They were definitely hurting. But...

“Are you sure this is all right, Mother?” I asked. “What if they come after you next?”

“Never fear. I’ve already matched last year’s donation from our house. Besides, charity balls aren’t the sort of thing one is required to attend. I made sure to send letters notifying those whose functions I missed. ‘As the mother of an excommunicated woman, I fear my presence at your party would be a distraction, so I will not be attending.’”

I couldn’t help but laugh out loud at my mother’s frank response.

“Well, once we’ve solved this problem, I’ll go ahead and start turning up again. That was one of the conditions upon which the church agreed to surrender those documents to Dean.”

“What do you mean?”

“He had predicted my ploy, so he used my influence as leverage. I don’t mind it, though, not if he had to use my name in order to help you.”

Goodness. Dean really had made a bold move. Not only had he used my mother’s name without getting her permission, he had used her as a bargaining chip. And he hadn’t even told her until after the fact. It was a good thing she had decided to forgive him, but it gave me a headache just thinking about it.

“Sister, I have news for you as well,” Berne said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Hm? What is it?”

“Van wasn’t behind this.”

“So I should just forgive him?” I glared at Berne, but he shook his head.

“No. I just wanted you to know I think that this can all be traced back to the pope himself. And to a person he’s lately associated with—a certain merchant who is particularly friendly with Lord Monroe.”

“So you think this merchant might be pulling the strings behind the scenes?”

“Perhaps. I found it hard to believe even the pope would dare to attack a duke’s family so openly. So I spoke with Van. Of course, there were things I couldn’t come straight out and ask, but the thing that really caught my attention was when he mentioned that merchant. Apparently, the merchant requested an audience with the pope several times, and he notably did so right before the day your excommunication was issued. I just can’t believe it’s a coincidence.”

“I see. Father, do you know anything about this merchant?”

“I’m investigating him, of course.”

Good. I had to admit I was impressed with Berne’s actions. He’d been an excellent spy, getting so much information from our avowed enemies. He’d done such a good job, in fact, that I felt compelled to go ahead and ask the real question on my mind. “I have to wonder, was Prince Edward involved in this matter?”

“No, not to my knowledge. However...”

“What?”

“It’s quite difficult for me to say this, but...he’s exceptionally unhappy that you’ve received the queen dowager’s backing. Shall I call it a grudge? And he’s complained about you to a number of people, asking what could be done. Then, once he heard about this incident with the church, he made his move. I believe he personally hired a number of your employees for a new venture of his own.”

“What? Oh, my...”

What a pathetic little man. Although, sales had dropped largely because of the rest of this matter, so it wasn’t entirely his fault.

“I’m going to do everything in my power to get the Azuta Corporation back up to speed once this is all over. Thank you for the information, Berne.”

“Of course.”

“Now, Iris, dear—why don’t you go ahead and have dinner with us and then go to bed early? Tomorrow’s a big day. You need a nice, hot meal and all the

rest you can get so you can claim victory on the morrow.”

“Yes, Mother.”

She was right. Tomorrow was the big day. I had felt like a soldier heading to war the day of the Foundation Day celebration, but this battle would be even more intense. Tomorrow would decide my fate. If I lost, there would be no coming back for me. It would be the most important day of my life.

I readied myself and headed for the palace. I chose a simple dress, just as I had when I gave my speech at the church. Today, my father would face an inquiry about this entire situation. Since my excommunication had affected the nobility on such a large scale, they wanted him to provide an explanation as the person responsible for me. You might liken it to a company president demanding an explanation from a manager about their subordinate’s behavior.

This inquiry would decide my fate. Best-case scenario, I would be disowned or put under house arrest. In the worst-case, I’d be thrown in jail or given the death penalty. Obviously, a number of nobles were invested in the matter, and they had gathered to spectate.

I had only Lyle and Dida with me as my bodyguards as I entered the palace. To be honest, I hadn’t been formally invited. As I was technically under house arrest, I couldn’t exactly *be* invited, but I had come with the queen dowager’s permission. As such, I took a route she had told me about so that no one would see me. I felt like a trespasser. Perhaps that wasn’t an incorrect statement.

“Duke Armelia, how do you expect to handle the heavy burden of overseeing our kingdom when you can’t even supervise your own daughter?”

That voice belonged to Queen Ellia. She was blaming my father for my conduct and meant to imply that he should resign his post as the prime minister.

Some people who favored Queen Ellia began to snicker. Other nobles were swept up in the mood and murmured agreement.

“The queen’s right,” one said. “This is a terribly shameful incident for our kingdom. Is that girl the only one who bears responsibility?”

“Has he *ever* had control over his house?” another asked.

My father’s low voice cut through the noise of the crowd. “I have never supervised her.”

“So you think your failure to oversee her absolves you of guilt? You would shirk your responsibility?” Queen Ellia snorted. Her lecturing tone was haughty. “Did you hear that? The post of prime minister has always been held by the ducal house of Armelia. But now the people wonder if you should even bear the responsibility of your own duchy. Don’t tell me you’d run from that, too.”

In other words, she was threatening to take our domain.

From the standpoint of the other nobles, they stood to benefit a great deal if they could get their hands on a domain experiencing as much growth as ours now was. If anyone in charge of a domain neighboring ours approached Queen Ellia to make their case, there was a good chance they might be given permission to wrest it from us. I could see these very people emphatically nodding in agreement with everything she said.

Another wave of murmurs washed through the crowd. My father swept his glare over them. His cold gaze silenced them.

“I shirk no responsibility. I only said that I do not supervise my daughter. And that is because I knew my daughter, my noble line, would do the right thing as she saw to Armelia in my place. I speak from my position as prime minister when I say that I did not misjudge her.”

“Thank you, Father,” I whispered.

Hearing that firm statement gave me the courage I needed to walk forward. My hands trembled as I took my first step. I’d been waiting in a hidden room that gave me a view of the audience chamber, so I didn’t even have to pass by anyone—yet.

The hallway twisted and turned as I made my way to the audience chamber and stood outside the door. The guards waiting outside were flustered at first and cried “Halt!”

But then I showed them the letter I had received from the queen dowager, and they let me pass.

The second that the doors to the chamber opened, everyone turned and stared at me. Once they realized who exactly had interrupted this vitally important inquiry, the crowd erupted in shouts. The only people who weren't surprised to see me were my father, the queen dowager, and Father Rafsimons Christopher.

I moved farther into the room. The audience chamber was ornate yet austere. As I walked through it, I was greeted by stern expressions on either side of the aisle. The royal family sat at the front of the chamber, facing the crowd—although today, only the queen dowager and Queen Ellia were present, along with officials from the Darryl Church.

I was especially terrified of these church officials, and my hands began to tremble again. And here I'd thought I'd finally summoned my courage!

Don't worry, I told myself as I clenched my hands into fists. But I couldn't stop shaking. The walk to the front of the chamber felt like an eternity, though I'm sure it only took a minute.

Once I got there, my focus settled on one person. Father Rafsimons Christopher. He was a thin, intelligent-looking man who wore spectacles. His face was expressionless. But unlike the rest of the crowd, I had the impression that he was sizing me up, as if he was wondering if I might really turn this situation in my favor. If I was really going to use what he'd given me.

The instant that thought ran through my head, my hands stopped shaking. I had remembered the man who had connected me with Father Rafsimons in the first place. I wasn't about to waste all the effort he'd gone to for my sake. I had to live up to the trust he and everyone else had placed in me.

I stood beside my father. An empty throne loomed across from us, Queen Ellia and the queen dowager seated on either side of it. The Darryl Church officials sat in ordered seats in front of them.

"Why are you here?" Queen Ellia's cold voice asked, her eyes staring daggers at me.

"Because I thought the best person to explain the situation would be the one

most directly involved.”

“Explain? No explanation will change the fact that you have been excommunicated from the holy Darryl Church. This inquiry has nothing to do with that. The sole purpose of our work today is to establish how Duke Armelia plans to atone for your sins.”

Pope Wilmots Lutasha—father of Van Lutasha, one of the second prince’s cronies—nodded emphatically in agreement. “Iris Lana Armelia. You destroyed a church, the holy ground of God, without permission. It was a despicable act for any person of faith—and even worse for one who stands above others and governs them. I’m sure God wept over your unspeakable deed.”

“I agree, Pope Lutasha. Destroying a sacred sanctuary, a place of prayer, is most certainly a despicable act. I understand why God might weep over such a thing.”

Queen Ellia and the pope looked equally confused as to why I was agreeing with their accusations.

“By the same token, I think that selling the land on which a church stands is equally impious. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“What are you trying to say?” Queen Ellia snorted with laughter and then covered her mouth with her fan to hide it.

“Exactly what I said, Queen Ellia.”

“I’m asking what you meant by it. If destroying holy ground is wicked, could transferring it to someone outside the church be good? Of course not. Of course it’s impious.”

“Exactly. I agree. Yet here I have the deed of sale proving that the land the church stood on was sold.”

I held up one of the documents I’d brought. It was the deed of sale I’d found when I looked into the human traffickers harassing the orphans. The traffickers were listed as the buyers, and the name on the line that said “Seller” was none other than the Darryl Church.

The crowd that had grown so raucous suddenly fell completely silent. Those in

the second prince's faction tried to raise their voices again soon enough, but everyone had started to sense where this was going.

"I was shocked to learn anyone would sell the *holy ground* upon which a church stood. Just as Your Majesty says, selling land reserved for a church is an appalling act of blasphemy. Yet immediately after the church's caretaker passed away, the land upon which it stood was sold. Moreover, the signature of the seller belongs to a priest of the Darryl Church. What do you make of that?"

"Nonsense! A priest of the church would never sell holy ground! Let alone a church! It must have been someone impersonating a priest, which is a *very* serious crime!"

"I also wanted to believe it wasn't the case. How dare a servant of God do such a thing? But it is in fact what happened. This church's caretaker was a nun, and after she passed, the church fell to ruin and the new owners tried to force the orphans who lived there to leave."

"Oh, yes. I'm *sure* that's the truth. How dare you doubt servants of God in favor of some random strangers? And you call yourself a noble? Honestly, it's despicable." Queen Ellia snickered, denying my claims outright.

"As I said, *I also wanted to believe*. As everyone knows, I am the acting governor of Armelia. My father entrusted me with this position, and I have worked tirelessly to reform our government. I've completely revamped the tax system, performed a census, reevaluated every official in our employ...and registered ownership for every plot of land in our domain."

"What of it?"

"In order to build our land ownership registry, we worked with all landowners, including the church. If a party declared that they could not claim ownership of a parcel of land, then they were not registered as the owner."

Even though I hadn't planned on having to use the census and registry like this, I was so thankful that I had taken care of them as soon as I had.

"In our registry, the Darryl Church did not claim ownership of this land. I was shocked. I couldn't believe that the Darryl Church had actually sold it. But I have the proof right here, in this document." I held it up again. The seal of a Darryl

Church priest was clearly stamped on it.

“The orphans who were looked after by the nun were still there, but the church had fallen into a heartbreaking state of disrepair. I contacted a priest of the Darryl Church and consulted with him over whether it would be better to tear that church down and build a new one in its place. Not only were the officials of the church made aware of my plan, I sent these plans to other kingdom officials as well. I have copies of those notices here, too.”

“I see you have proof of these notifications to the kingdom, but do you have proof that you proposed this idea to the church?” Queen Ellia frowned, and her voice was razor sharp. “As I said before, perhaps you were working with an individual who was impersonating a priest? Or perhaps you conspired with someone after the fact to fabricate all this ‘proof’?”

In other words, she was demanding more evidence.

“I sent the plans directly to the palace, so those officials surely were not impersonators. Unless we should doubt the veracity of every interaction we have with the palace?” I said with as much sarcasm as I could muster.

Queen Ellia snapped her fan shut, looking profoundly uncomfortable. “That’s enough! This is of no consequence. It appears you’re running your mouth to talk away your sins. But as I said, you have no proof that you engaged with a true member of the Darryl Church. No matter how much evidence you claim to have, I will not be deceived!”

She wanted to tell me to give it up—but I spoke before she could.

“I do have more proof. Right here.”

I took out a thin booklet, one that was very old and yellowed.

“Wh-what’s that?!”

Most of the people in the room didn’t recognize it, and they murmured to each other, confused. But as soon as the Darryl Church officials laid eyes upon it, all the color drained from their faces. They knew exactly what I held.

“Any official of the Darryl Church can tell you what this is, because they know better than anyone: it’s a ledger of every single priest in the kingdom.”



The Darryl Church was an organization, after all.

Maybe layman's terms were a bit inaccurate, but priests are like everyone else—they need some kind of income to live on. I'd been sure they had to have *some* manner of record of their employees in order to manage their payroll, and it turned out I was right.

There was also a list of the priests who owned the various churches. Including the ones I'd spoken to, of course.

"The name of the priest who signed the deed of sale, as well as the one with whom I communicated about rebuilding the church, are both here in this ledger. I was surprised to see they both held quite prominent positions within the Darryl Church."

"How did you..." Pope Lutasha muttered in disbelief, staring at the booklet.

This ledger was never to be taken off the premises of the main church, so they were all floored to see it in my possession. I'd known that no matter what evidence I presented, I might have been able to convince the nobles to take my side, but the church would never budge. They would vehemently deny that any member of their clergy would be capable of actually selling a church. This ledger was the only way to shut them up.

"I cannot imagine how you got that, but I doubt that booklet is even real!" Father Rafsimons spat.

Queen Ellia's eyes glinted. So predictable. "Yes, exactly!"

"Go ahead and check it yourself, Father Rafsimons. And anyone else who'd like to see it as well." I took a step toward them. No one stopped me.

I handed Father Rafsimons the ledger, and he flipped through it until he stopped at the final page. His eyes widened in shock as he stared down. "This is..."

I had to admit, I was thoroughly impressed with his acting.

"I apologize. Yes, this definitely belongs to the church," he said hesitantly. His voice was quiet, yet it resounded throughout the room.

"No!"

“Go ahead and see for yourselves.” Father Rafsimons passed the notebook to another church official, who passed it to another. At first, each one looked skeptical, but then, one by one, they nodded their assent.

“And just what makes you so certain?” Queen Ellia asked with clear annoyance. Her hands were shaking; she had to be incredibly angry.

“The last page bears the mark of both the pope and the cardinals’ official seals. In order to prevent forgeries, these particular seals have never been made public. They are used only for internal documents such as this.”

Specifically, it bore the seals of the pope and the five cardinals directly beneath him, who were the highest-ranking officials in the church.

“This is undeniably authentic,” I said. “I’m sure this will all go much faster if we just check in with the rest of those involved, don’t you think?”

The moment those words left my lips, Lyle strode into the chamber escorting two men, i.e., the priests in question. Ah, pardon me—*former* priests. Tanya had used the full authority of my family in order to locate them.

“Would the two of you please introduce yourselves?” I did my best to sound kind.

“M-my name is Danon. I did clerical work at the church in the capital.”

By that, he could only mean one place: the church whose congregation comprised nearly half the capital’s population—the church that the royal family and the highest-ranking officials all attended. It was inextricably associated with the royal line.

“I assisted the pope with all his needs. Regarding the sale of the land in Armelia, the pope gave me permission to sign the deed on his behalf. But then for some reason, I was abruptly fired...”

“My name is Leinin,” said the other man. “I also worked at the church in the capital. I received the request from the governor of Armelia regarding the church in question and responded. But for some reason, I was also abruptly let go from the church following that. They told me it was because I gave false statements, but I was only following orders. I have a copy of the response we sent to the governor of Armelia, which had been approved by the church. If you

have any doubts regarding the truth of my words, this document should clear my name.”

The crowd grew even louder after hearing these two statements. I could feel it in my bones that the tide had turned in my favor.

“I’m sure the officials of the Darryl Church recognize these two men.” Naturally, this wasn’t actually a question.

The officials’ eyes widened, and they looked away awkwardly.

“I have additional physical proof as well as witnesses, but I suspect that I have already sufficiently proved my innocence, don’t you think?” I asked calmly.

Queen Ellia bit her lip. Oh, I’m sure there were dozens of things she wanted to say to me circling through her head, but none of them would have been permissible in front of this crowd.

Likewise, Pope Lutasha’s face had gone deep red with anger, but he said nothing.

The queen dowager finally broke her silence. “Very well, then. I think we’ve seen this girl did nothing wrong, and I’m sure everyone here can agree with me. Yes?”

She had posed a question just as I had, but it was clear she wasn’t truly asking for anyone’s opinion. In fact, she was putting an end to this inquiry once and for all.

“Iris Lana Armelia, the royal family hereby proclaims that you have done nothing at all to shame the name of House Armelia, a most noble family of our kingdom.”

There. Her declaration sealed the deal.

“My thanks, Your Majesty. Might I say one last thing?”

“Oh? What else have you to tell us?”

“It’s in regard to who bears true responsibility for this incident.”

Queen Ellia scowled. “You’ve already been absolved. I don’t imagine House Armelia will face any punishment for this either...”

“Of course not. That’s not what I meant. I was referring to the person who *caused* this misunderstanding. That is who bears the responsibility.”

I lifted my head and stared straight ahead. Directly at Pope Lutasha.

“House Armelia has served the royal family for generations. We have a long history of loyalty and have been granted great influence for it. So to falsely accuse a member of that house of such egregious acts is simply unacceptable.”

Several people averted their eyes. Every lie they’d spewed before was coming right back at them like a boomerang.

“Now that my innocence has been proven, it would set a terrible example for our kingdom if the person responsible were to go unpunished.” I didn’t mention Pope Lutasha, but I continued to stare right at him the entire time I spoke.

“That rings true... What do you think, Ellia?” The queen dowager asked the queen.

But Queen Ellia said nothing.

“All right, then. What does the Darryl Church have to say for itself?” The queen dowager gave an exaggerated sigh as she turned the question over to the officials.

Several of them opened their mouths to speak, got flustered, and then closed their mouths again.

“I simply don’t understand this silence. As I was listening to Iris, a thought crossed my mind. I’m sure everyone here thought something similar. Whyever did the Darryl Church fire the priests involved and suppress evidence...if not to *purposefully* undermine Iris? Or perhaps even the entirety of House Armelia, one of the most prominent noble families in our kingdom? Just how do you intend to take responsibility for that?”

The entire room went deathly quiet, and then Father Rafsimons spoke up. All eyes turned to him. “With all due respect, Your Majesty... This was an utter failure on the church’s part. I would like to conduct a thorough investigation to identify all parties responsible and punish them accordingly.”

“That will certainly be necessary. But how can we be sure you will in fact do

this, when the officials of the church stand surrounded by a veil of secrecy?" The queen dowager's expression was as cold as ice as she stared at the church officials. She cast the most intimidating pall upon the chamber, just as my father had.

But she was right. The church was so deeply embedded in our society that not even the most influential noble house could interfere with it. Moreover, since it was the only state religion in our kingdom, claiming every citizen as a believer, not even the royal family could interfere with its sacred status. If this investigation was mishandled, it could stir doubt among the citizens, and that could leave an opening for any number of malcontents to take advantage of.

Either way, the church couldn't use God as a shield to escape responsibility for this scandal.

For my part, if I didn't use this opportunity to split the church off of the second prince's faction, who knew what they would do to me in the future? At the very least, I had to get the pope to abdicate, especially since Van was so close to Edward. I had to sever that connection.

"I won't let that happen, of course," Father Rafsimons declared. "I am a priest who serves God, but I am also a citizen of the kingdom of Tasmeria, and therefore I have every intention of punishing those involved in this transgression, no matter their position within the church. And as proof... Lady Iris, since your innocence has now been proven, I assume you no longer need that ledger?"

"That's correct."

"Would you mind giving it to the queen dowager?"

"Of course. All I do is for the good of the kingdom."

"Now, Your Majesty, please take that ledger into your keeping. As you know, it has a list of all the Darryl Church officials in the kingdom as well as their registered churches."

The queen dowager blinked in surprise for a moment. The booklet listed which church each official was employed at, as well as their positions. It was a glimpse inside the inner workings of the church, hence why it was never

permitted to leave the premises. Her reaction indicated that she knew full well the value of what she held.

“I recognize your commitment,” she said. “You have my confidence. Now, when you say those responsible will be punished no matter who they are—do you include yourself?”

“Of course. I shall notify everyone in the church’s employ, as well as the royal family and the nobility, that whoever is found to be responsible shall be punished to the full extent that the royal family allows.”

Pope Lutasha finally came back to his senses and cried out. “Father Rafsimons! What gives you permission to—”

But Father Rafsimons only turned a cool gaze toward the pope. “Pardon me for overstepping my bounds, but I have no other choice. We cannot turn a blind eye to the unspeakable treatment Duke Armelia’s daughter received as a consequence of these false accusations. You do understand that, don’t you, Your Holiness?”

The pope was silent.

“Look around. The people of this country doubt us. That in and of itself should never have happened. In order to rebuild trust with our followers, we must ensure this never happens again and severely punish those responsible.”

“Well put,” said the queen dowager. “Now that you’ve said as much, I assume you won’t mind if I place you in charge of the investigation, Father Rafsimons?”

“It would be my pleasure.” He bowed deeply to her.

“But!” Pope Lutasha raised his voice in a panic.

The queen dowager turned her frigid gaze on him. “What has you so flustered?”

“Please reconsider! Does anyone truly deserve punishment for this? Of course it’s possible that some individuals covered up misdeeds that were inconvenient for them, but—can’t we simply give Your Majesty a report after we’ve conducted a fair investigation?”

“I’m sorry to say, Pope Lutasha, but as Father Rafsimons just said, at the

moment, we cannot trust the word of anyone from the Darryl Church. Father Rafsimons has pledged to hold himself as accountable as everyone else, and so I have asked him to take charge of the investigation.”

“But...”

“I will hear no further arguments on the matter. Father Rafsimons, I am counting on you.”

“With God as my witness, I shall follow through.”

“If I may speak, there’s something else I’d like you to investigate as well, Father Rafsimons,” I said, speaking loudly and clearly.

“What’s that?”

“The church’s flow of funds.”

“You mean...what happened to the money the church received when they sold that holy ground in Armelia? Yes, I shall include that as part of the investigation.”

“Yes, I’d like you to. However, there’s something else on my mind.”

“Oho?”

“They received quite a sum for the land that the church stood on, yes, but they also receive large sums of money from the nobility in the name of donations. Yet they begged my mother to attend their charity balls, lest they receive too few donations to continue operations. What is the meaning of this?”

“Well...”

“You intend to notify the nobility of this incident in order to regain their trust, yes? In that case, I think this matter also requires thorough investigation. As governor of Armelia, I have of course made my own donations, and I do not begrudge them in the least. I’m sure now that my innocence has been proven, my mother will feel the same way. But I fear something similar will happen again unless we get to the bottom of this matter.”

“Yes, I think you speak some unfortunate truths, Lady Iris.” Father Rafsimons’s face was bitter. I wasn’t sure if it was because I was touching on a sensitive

subject or because we hadn't discussed this beforehand in our meeting. Either way, I had no intention of stopping.

"Also, I have a concern about the Azuta Corporation. Please excuse my frankness, Pope Lutasha, but how much is your salary?"

"What?! How dare you ask a servant of God such a vulgar question!"

"I don't ask it because I want to, but this is an important matter. This year, you've spent about the same amount purchasing Azuta Corporation products as some of the richest nobles. I have to think your salary is quite hefty. Father Rafsimons?"

"It isn't," said Father Rafsimons.

"Well, then, Your Holiness, how in the world did you afford to spend so much on our products?"

"What cheek!" the pope snapped. "I would do no such thing!"

I didn't come right out and say he'd used the money from the sale of the church to fund his luxury spending spree, but I saw the doubt and suspicion crossing people's faces, so I knew the seed had been planted.

"Of course," I said, "because to stand here and accuse you of such a thing without proof would be to do the exact same thing the Darryl Church did to me. Father Rafsimons? Please conduct a thorough investigation to discern where those funds went."

"O-of course."

"Is there anything else, Iris Lana Armelia?" the queen dowager asked.

"No, nothing." I shook my head and bowed to the queen dowager.

"I see. I hereby order the officials of the Darryl Church to be placed under house arrest until the investigation is completed—especially Pope Lutasha and the cardinals."

The pope opened his mouth to say something but then decided not to. Did he want to once again claim innocence, or was he trying to hide something? I felt momentarily anxious about it. I'd thought he would put up more of a fight, so his easy acquiescence made me nervous. Still, I had successfully struck back

against the church. And I was sure that Pope Lutasha could expect a most exacting investigation.

Finally, the inquiry had come to a close.

“I wish you wouldn’t have made my heart race like that!”

“Oh? You didn’t have faith in me?”

Father Rafsimons chuckled wryly at my question.

It had been a week since the inquiry. In that week, the pope and his allies had been purged one after another. They weren’t excommunicated, but they were removed from their posts, so it was in the end a similarly severe punishment.

The investigation of church funds was still ongoing, but I was confident that these men would face the full extent of the kingdom’s punitive system once those crimes came to light.

“That’s not it. I was just surprised you brought it up during the inquiry. Now I think I know how a prey animal feels when cornered by a predator.”

“I had a good reason for saying it there. I had to cast doubt on the church in front of the entire nobility. That’s rendered it far more difficult for his allies to plot any resistance in the open.”

In a single moment, I had ruined every personal connection and ounce of trust the pope had ever earned. Even if he tried to plot against me again, no one would dare cooperate with him in fear of earning my suspicion.

“If he does try anything again, he’ll have to have an extraordinary reason for doing so. It might be necessary to root out the rest of his ilk as well.”

“You certainly have a point.” Father Rafsimons let out a sigh.

“Well? Are you satisfied with the outcome?”

“I think so. We were able to oust the pope and his faction, and now we’ll be able to start rooting out the rest of the corruption in the church.”

If you had to describe the relationship between Father Rafsimons and me, the most suitable word would be “accomplices.” Although it had seemed we were

on opposing sides during the inquiry, we had been in on it together behind the scenes.

This accomplice was the final piece I had been missing that Dean had provided for me. I had desperately needed definitive proof of the church's involvement before the inquiry. However, that proof had been incredibly difficult for me to get, since I had been excommunicated. But Dean had given me access to the exact person I needed.

"Now you can have what you wanted—the church is at last headed down the righteous path," I said.

Father Rafsimons had been deeply unhappy with the church's direction as of late. He had risen through the ranks but had been unable to be elevated any further due to the war between internal factions.

"Indeed... I'm ashamed to admit it, but the degree of corruption in the capital's church was truly incredible. Clergymen simply cannot start acting like nobles. Getting caught up in worldly indulgences and embezzling money from the sale of a church is a blasphemy upon blasphemies. If the church had continued on under those people, it would've lost the people's trust sooner or later. And all because those people had been enabled to neglect their duties. I intend to set things right."

"I'm counting on you, Father."

"I suppose now it's my turn to be tested, hm?" he said with a laugh.

"And did I live up to your expectations?" I asked.

He was the one who had provided me with the ledger, of course. And since it was absolutely forbidden to take the booklet off church premises, he had taken an enormous gamble—a *profound* risk—to help me.

Also, while I no longer had them, he had given me leverage against him in the form of documents with his signature. That was how he had proven his trustworthiness as an accomplice. He had vowed not to betray me, and I had vowed the same to him.

"You have. So now it's my turn."

“I can’t express my gratitude. I swear that House Armelia will do everything in its power to aid you moving forward.” In exchange for his cooperation, I’d promised to give him our full support once my position was recovered. “Well, I suppose I should be going now.”

“Oh, already?”

“Yes, I’m terribly busy with the company these days.”

Not only had my excommunication been rescinded, I’d received a full apology from the church. Immediately following that, I’d put a new product out for sale. It was a dessert using the dandelion coffee I’d had Merida make, a simple one that also used gelatin. It was a real hit, and sales were already up.

I had also put several new chocolate products out. Only those on the development team in the main headquarters of the Azuta Corporation in Armelia had known about it, so even if the employees whom Prince Edward had poached for his own venture had tried to copy our wares, none of them had the recipes for these new products. As such, our customers were returning.

As well, I’d heard that a number of my employees who had left me for Edward wanted to come back. As if I’d allow that.

My clients who had turned their back on us were also returning, so soon enough, the copycat companies would have a hard time truly competing with us. I’d heard they were careless with their businesses anyway.

“All right, then. Thank you for everything.”

After Iris left, Father Rafsimons let out a sigh. Talking with her always made him incredibly anxious. Her aura was more dignified and intimidating than that of any other noble he’d ever met—and coupled with the business acumen of a merchant at that. He had no idea how anyone could ever look down on her.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. He had a feeling it was his other accomplice.

“Ah, pardon me, Dean. Lady Iris was just here. Did you miss her?”

“Yes, and I did it on purpose.” Dean chuckled and sat across from the priest in

the seat Iris had just vacated. “Well? How are things?”

“Going so smoothly, it’s almost frightening, actually. Now that we’ve shaken things up, all the dust has come out into the open, thanks to Lady Iris.”

“I see.” Dean smiled gently.

Father Rafsimons was surprised to see that face. “Aren’t you going to ask for more details?”

“I’ll see them when I read your report.”

“That’s true.”

The tender smile vanished from Dean’s face as he resumed his usual expression. Father Rafsimons felt himself tensing up as well. He was always nervous when he met with Dean, almost more so than when he met with Lady Iris.

“I know the risk you took to see this through,” said Father Rafsimons.

“It was a small price to pay in exchange for rooting out the corruption in the church.”

“Was it really that small? The general public may not realize it, but anyone with an ounce of good sense has figured it out—that although you’re supposedly studying abroad, you were actually directing your faction to ensure that the inquiry ran smoothly to prevent the ouster of the prime minister. Now that I think about it, that must’ve taken quite a network.”

“Goodness. Now that you mention it, you’re right.”

“Are you sure that was a good idea? Normally, you prefer working from the shadows, but you really put yourself out there.”

“I couldn’t let my grandmother be the one to put herself on the line this time. Since my father’s health has declined, she’s the head of the family. I couldn’t have her pitting herself against the church. That just would’ve made things worse.”

“I suppose that’s a good point.”

“What’s the problem, anyway? I’ve simply returned from a long absence. It’s

my choice to decide how I move forward at this point. And anyway, I'm not putting my name out there as much as you might think. If I did, I'd have all sorts of deadly problems to deal with, even if it was just one little rumor."

"I'm not sure if measuring your well-being by the number of assassins actively hunting you is the right way to go, but all right, then."

"Anyway, let's get back to the main topic."

At this prompting, Father Rafsimons took out a piece of paper and handed it to Dean. He read it over, checked it, and burned it. Then he read and checked the next document the priest handed him.

"Yes, this is it," Dean said. The priest nodded and added his signature, then placed his seal on the document.

The document they had just burned was the one Dean had exchanged with Iris before giving her the ledger. The document said: "All responsibility lies with Dean." That was the collateral he had put up in order for the priest to give Iris the booklet.

In other words, if Iris had not emerged victorious after the inquiry and the first prince's faction had not won, or the end result had not lived up to Father Rafsimons' expectations, Dean would have taken full responsibility for the entire incident. Without this guarantee, no one who had worked so many long years at the center of the battle between political factions would have trusted some girl they'd never met before at the risk of their own life.

These two documents, the one they had burned and the one they held now, had been written to become valid at this time. They'd arranged beforehand that if Iris won Father Rafsimons's favor, this new contract would be put into effect. That was the one he had just signed; it'd already had Dean's signature on it. It stated that from hereafter, Father Rafsimons would swear his allegiance to Dean.

"When you first contacted me a few years ago, I thought I was dreaming," said Father Rafsimons. "But I'm glad I listened to you and that I didn't give up on the church."

"Everything has been arranged for you to move forward. Don't slow down

now.”

“No, of course not.”

Footsteps echoed loudly as two men walked down a darkened hall.

“Quite a lovely dungeon.”

Rudy laughed in response to the man’s sarcastic quip. “Well, he is the pope. We couldn’t house him with the commoners.”

“It was that line of thought that got him into this mess in the first place, wasn’t it?”

The man gave instructions to the guards, who opened the doors. The guards were standing watch over a special jail cell in which the pope was being held.

“Who’s there—ah, it’s you!” The pope’s eyes widened when he saw who it was.

The man was amused by his reaction, his lips curving up into a grin. “It’s been a long time, Pope Wilmots Lutasha. Although I suppose now you’re no longer a pope.”

The man was aware that the smile on his face was quite mean. He couldn’t help it; the knowledge that he was about to snuff out part of the church’s deep-seated corruption was just too sweet.

“Prince Alfred! Why are you here?”

“Why? Well, because you called me, of course.”

After the briefest pause, the truth finally dawned on Lutasha, and he took several deep breaths to calm himself.

“After you joined forces with Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea, I was compelled to come forward in order to put a stop to it. We’re vying for power, after all. Presently, they have more influence in the capital. Once they had the church’s backing as well, I couldn’t just keep lurking in the shadows. They used your leverage to try to rid themselves of House Armelia, which they find most troubling. I’m not sure they’ll be pleased with the outcome, however, as not

only did they fail in that regard, they also forced me to intervene more directly.”

“I-It’s as you say, Your Highness. Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea just used me! Please, have mercy on me, Prince Alfred!”

At this, the prince laughed out loud. He couldn’t help it. He was far too amused. Then he stared at Lutasha like he was out of his mind. “You underestimate me. Were you instructed to do this?”

“Of course not! Queen Ellia would never!”

“That’s not who I meant.” The prince’s voice was ice-cold. Colder, actually, as it had borne no warmth in the first place.

Lutasha blanched at the audible menace in his tone. “What?”

“I’m talking about the merchant. What was his name? Divan?”

All the blood drained from Lutasha’s face. His reaction was so transparent that the prince had to wonder how he’d ever survived as the highest-ranking member in such a cutthroat world as the church.

“H-how did you...?”

“You were a pawn used by Queen Ellia and Marquis Marea. It’s most accurate to put it like that. You really should have predicted this would happen before you joined forces with them. Why *did* you just go ahead and do whatever they said? Didn’t it occur to you that all of you might have been manipulated?”

Lutasha’s mouth hung open.

“Your purpose was never truly to oust Iris. Well, they would have liked it if you succeeded. But all you really had to do was temporarily hamper the power of Louis de Armelia. You needed us focused on him to make it easier for Divan and his people to act. And his job was to disrupt the flow of income to House Armelia. I don’t know if you thought you’d be rewarded with a position of faith or nobility in *that* country—but then, I’m not asking you to answer me.”

“But if you knew all that, then why...”

“Why? I’ve been waiting for a chance to lance the boils like you. All I had to do was destroy your plans. I have to thank you, though—you spared me the effort

and destroyed yourself first.”

Lutasha’s face twisted to an almost humorous extent.

“I’ll return with more news when it becomes available. Until then, you may continue relaxing in this wonderful room of yours.”

Now that the prince had said all he wished to say, Rudy escorted him out of the room. They heard the sound of Lutasha wailing behind them.

Good thing I left when I did, the prince thought with a smirk.

“You’ve really made your move now, Prince Alfred,” Rudy remarked with a grin.

“This was my best chance to get at the church. It’s used its faith as a shield for far too long. I couldn’t waste the opportunity.”

“Ah, that’s not what I meant. I was referring to helping Iris.”

The prince gave Rudy an irritable look. “Well. She stood on the gallows for me. It was the least I could do in return.”

“Even if you did save her from those false charges in the end, you still could have used the chance to strip House Armelia of its power. Yet you chose to help her. And you crossed quite a dangerous bridge to do so.”

“Yes? What of it?”

“I’d like to leave it at that, but unfortunately I can’t. Because of this, you’re officially in league with House Armelia. From now on, when the head of the Armelia family makes a move, the neutral faction who favors the king will start leaning toward our side.”

Rudy was right. Once the neutral faction heard that the first prince had entered the fray in earnest, they would try to get in contact with him.

“But most of all, as her cousin, I want to thank you for helping her.”

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“You’re quite fond of my cousin, aren’t you?” Rudy asked with a grin.

The prince let out a sigh. Had that been the conversation Rudy had been angling for from the start? “What about you? You seem to know an awful lot

about her.”

“Well, I’m her cousin, after all. But not only have you kept returning for her temporary contracts, now you’ve become quite intimately involved with her. I can’t think of anyone else who would do such a thing for her sake.” Rudy laughed.

“I was...surprised. She visits the orphanage often and plays with the children. And not as a noblewoman. She hares off to take care of other things by herself, too. Even if she were doing it without an alias, I’d hardly believe it if you told me.” The prince shook his head, still in disbelief. “I really only meant to work with her the once.”

It had all started from pure curiosity over how Armelia had developed so much so quickly. Once the prince had heard the acting governor was Iris, a girl who had been expelled from the academy, his curiosity had only grown stronger.

He’d seen her once while at the academy, but at the time, his only impression of her had been that she was cruel. She had unabashedly insulted Yuri Neuer to her face. Not only had the words themselves made Alfred raise an eyebrow, he had thought them bitingly harsh even knowing the circumstance that prompted them—and his brother’s involvement in it.

And now that girl was an acting governor? Alfred hadn’t been able to fathom what the prime minister was thinking. He assumed the people surrounding Iris had to be impressive indeed in order for Armelia to have experienced such growth. He decided to go undercover to see the inner workings of the duchy. It had shocked him to see she really was the one giving orders. The realization had changed him.

“It was fascinating. I’d never been responsible for anyone but my own family, and nothing I was responsible for had ever felt outside of my control. Thus, I’d never felt a true sense of accomplishment. In fact, I felt nothing about everything, and nothing truly interested me. But being with her is invigorating. She has ideas I never could have imagined, and I can never predict what she’ll do. Everything about her broke my beliefs about the world as I knew it. She constantly inspires me with new innovations. Every time I’m about to see her,

my heart beats faster, wondering what new thing she'll show me. I honestly never tire of her, and I started wanting to just watch over her."

In truth, he wanted to spoil her rotten. He wanted her to break down all her walls, but only for him, so only he would ever see her vulnerabilities. She hadn't allowed it yet, but even that stubbornness was adorable to him. He really was terribly weak for her.

"To me, the people, money, government—I dealt with them all at a desk. Numbers were numbers and nothing more, nothing less. The people who worked for me were pawns on a chessboard and all I had to do was determine where to move them. But after I met her, I realized none of that was true."

"Yes, you've definitely softened."

"Ha. You're just going to come right out and say it?"

"That's why I'm worried." Rudy's tone suddenly changed. Before it had been teasing, but now it was serious. "The fact that you've grown softer is a good thing for you personally. But if you let yourself get carried away with your emotions, it could ruin your plan. That's all I'm saying."

"You just thanked me for saving your cousin. Now you're telling me to let Iris get involved, Rudius Gib Anderson?"

"First, I think it would take a lot more to take her down. Second, no matter what, I know I'll always choose you, Alfred Dean Tasmeria."

Rudy's words hit Alfred hard. He was declaring his loyalty to the prince over his own flesh and blood.

"Don't worry," Alfred said. "I won't change the plans we've already set into motion. My mind hasn't changed, not once, since we decided to remove both Ellia and the king from power. I won't become like my father."

Rudy breathed a sigh. "I'm relieved to hear that."

"You never had anything to fear. My resolve has only strengthened since forging a bond with her."

"Why?"

"An incompetent king kills his citizens. My father loved my mother, and even

though it's a tragic thing that he lost heart when he lost her, it's nothing to pity him for." The king had lost his will to live with the death of Queen Sharia. He'd grown distant even from himself. That was how Queen Ellia and her father, Marquis Marea, had taken so much power from him.

Like a fool, the king had turned a blind eye to Queen Ellia's involvement in Queen Sharia's death. Even worse, he'd been nothing more than her puppet as she tried to rid herself of both of Queen Sharia's children—Alfred and Letty. Even though they were the children the king's beloved late queen had given birth to, they had all but vanished from the king's life. If the queen dowager hadn't given them sanctuary, they would have suffered the same fate as their mother and died by Queen Ellia's hand.

"When I saw Iris risking it all, putting everything on the line for her duties, my conviction only deepened. The king is ill, and there's nothing to be done for him now. Sooner or later, he'll have to abdicate, and I will fulfill my sovereign duty to rid this kingdom of that corrupt filth."

Even if it means taking my own flesh and blood down with it, he thought. At this point, his filial bond with his father was nothing more than a burden. The only person he truly thought of as family was his sister, Letty. Removing the king from power wouldn't trouble him in the least.

Ahh, that's why... he thought, suddenly realizing something. Letty had also mentioned she thought he was softening. Only now did he realize how right she was.

He had indeed been cold and disinterested in the world. He hadn't cared how many people died or who suffered in order to achieve his goal—these losses were merely numbers. All he had to do in the aftermath was balance the loss with his victory.

But to the two people closest to him, who saw him from outside himself, his change had likely been strikingly obvious. In a way, that meant Iris had made even more of an impact on him than he'd realized, as she was the fulcrum of this change.

He had to laugh at himself for taking so long to notice it. Seriously, how blind was he?

“I won’t become like my father,” he assured Rudy, “because the woman who has my heart won’t become mine.”

Rudy frowned. “I believe House Armelia would be pleased to join with yours, if that’s what you desired. It would be the natural thing. Iris’s younger brother will be the next governor of Armelia. She’ll have to hand the reins over to him at some point anyway.”

True enough. House Armelia had Berne to care for its obligations, and at some point, Iris would be expected to relinquish her role to him. Alfred wondered what she thought about that. Moreover, even if she let Berne become the governor of Armelia, she would still have the Azuta Corporation. And with governorship off her plate, she might well find some other project to pursue and start running toward that.

“The woman I love is a woman who flies free. I could never clip her wings and keep her in the royal palace.”

She had dedicated the whole of herself to governance, and she spent every spare moment traveling through the duchy. Her eyes sparkled every time she overcame a challenge, which only made her more attractive to Alfred. It would be such a waste to confine her to the rules and regulations of the palace.

“I know that’s what the queen dowager expects, and I hate to disappoint her. But I have no intention of asking Iris to join the royal family.”

“I see.” Rudy had a conflicted expression—a mixture of relief and disappointment.

They continued talking as they walked to their destination, the library. This was where Alfred spent the majority of his time when he lived at the detached palace, besides when he slept. Lately, he had been traveling more, so he hadn’t come often, as he spent the majority of his time sneaking into the main palace to work.

One wall was covered in bookshelves, stuffed full of books. He’d always thought it quite the collection, but now that he had seen House Armelia’s library, it seemed small in comparison. How could one person own so many books, anyway?

Alfred walked toward a desk in the back of the library and took a seat there. This wooden desk and chair had been used by generations of the royal family, and although not particularly beautiful, it was comfortable, and therefore he had always been fond of it.

“Shall I bring you some tea?” Rudy asked.

The prince nodded and closed his eyes for a moment. He heard the faint sound of the door closing quietly. Rudy was speaking to a servant outside the door. The detached palace retained the bare minimum of servants. Ostensibly, this was because the queen dowager had retired, but more truly it was because Alfred and Letty lived there as well, and their lives were under constant threat from Queen Ellia.

“Here’s your tea, Prince Alfred.” Rudy carefully placed it in front of him, ever the model attendant. Rudy had a number of remarkable skills, but his tea especially was always delicious.

“Thank you. Hm? Is this...?”

“Yes, it’s one of the Azuta Corporation’s most popular herbal teas. Supposedly, it’s effective against fatigue.”

“I’m aware. That’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

The pale gold liquid had a unique aroma—it was exquisite.

“Sounds like the corporation is making a comeback.”

“Indeed. Iris remains impressive. Now that she’s been proven innocent, she isn’t letting any opportunities pass her by. She’s been putting out one new product after another.”

“Sounds like my younger brother is suffering because of it, too,” Alfred said with a laugh.

Although Prince Edward’s reasoning for starting his own company was small-minded, he certainly had chosen the right timing to steal employees from the Azuta Corporation. The ones in higher positions—for example, the employee in charge of the kitchen in the café located in the royal capital—would have been

well worth the effort of poaching and remained valuable. But most of the employees Edward had taken from Iris had not held meaningful positions and could therefore add little worth to his company.

Azuta's greatest asset was its ability to produce new and innovative products. In Alfred's estimation, Edward really should have tried to steal someone from their research and development department instead.

"The report from Father Rafsimons has arrived. First, the charges against the pope are as follows: embezzlement, false allegations against Iris Lana Armelia, and concealing evidence. Due to these incursions, he has been stripped of his position as pope. As you saw in our meeting with him, he is currently imprisoned. Two cardinals and three priests have also received punishment. The full report is here."

So two of the five cardinals had participated in this scheme. The church was fully on Edward's side, so Alfred had been lucky to hamstring their operation and their usefulness as pawns of House Marea. It would take some time for the church to regain its influence, and in the meantime, they would be unable to meaningfully participate in the war between the factions.

"By the way, have you seen Milo?"

"I haven't. I'm not sure he's returned yet."

"Hm..."

"You called, so I came... Dun-da-da-daaah!"

Suddenly a bright, cheerful voice interrupted their conversation. The owner of the voice was the person they had just been discussing. He had light brown hair, and his face was strangely sweet. It wouldn't have been surprising if someone mistook him for a woman.

"You remain unusually skilled at showing up out of nowhere..."

Milo was a master of stealth, so neither Alfred nor Rudy had been alerted to his presence. He had been trained as a spy from the time he was a young boy.

"That's because I'm a shadow," said Milo. "Well? What is it you wanted?"

"You know what I want. Your report. Get on with it."

“Eep! To start, that girl’s terrifying,” Milo began.

This elicited another sigh from the prince. “Why do you say that?”

“The pope’s son hasn’t yet been punished, you see. He’s still living in the house that’s been reserved for the papal family for generations.”

“We don’t yet know what will happen with regard to him,” said Rudy. “Those in line to become the pope enter the academy to study and make connections with the nobility. Upon graduation, they join the church and begin training for their papal duties. But now in the midst of Van’s training, his father was stripped of his position. If we wait for Van to finish training, we’ll be without a pope for several years. Not to mention, I’m sure many people will be opposed to installing a pope of a disgraced bloodline. I’ve already heard that very sentiment from some of the highest officials in the kingdom.”

Milo nodded in agreement. Basically, the chances that Van would succeed his father as the pope were exceedingly low.

“Mm-hmm, exactly. That’s why... So, the kid will try talking to that girl like he always used to, but she’ll say something like ‘Can I help you?’ Like he’s a *total* stranger. It surprised me. I always thought he stuck his nose into other people’s business without permission, but now she treats him like he’s totally useless. I never expected her to abandon him so quickly.” Although Milo said all of this with a smile, there was an edge in his voice. “I just think it’s a bit soon to cast him aside. I mean, if she really doesn’t have any use for him, I can understand cutting him off, but I just wonder if that’s really in her best interest right now.”

“Is she your type or something?”

“Not sure. She has her pros and cons. But I already have a master. I have no intentions of fooling around with her.”

“Well, and? Don’t tell me that’s the end of your report.”

At this, Milo’s eyes suddenly grew serious, though he maintained his smile. “No. There are an awful lot of rats hanging around her. What do you want me to do with them?”

“Her guards? Or...”

“Both, I’d say? They behave rather strangely for people tasked with her protection.”

“I see... You haven’t gotten anything useful out of them, have you?”

“No one in her circle knows what we’re up to, at least. The duke’s son is starting to distance himself from her—as is the son of the knight commander.”

“Oh? Even Dorssen?”

“Yes. The knight commander forced him to, though. Good thing either way. Got him before it was too late, I should say. If he’d kept clinging to her, we would’ve had to take care of him.”

“The absence of one knight makes little impact on the kingdom,” Rudy said sharply. It was understandable how he’d come by that perspective, given his grandfather’s affiliation with the military.

“That’s creepy, Rudy.”

“Says the man with the splendid mask,” Rudy retorted.

Milo didn’t seem bothered. He had his usual innocent smile plastered onto his face. “Ah, and the duke’s daughter’s maid is sniffing around again.”

“Tanya?”

“She’s pretty good. Almost makes me want to hire her.”

That was true praise, coming from Milo. While eccentric, he was purely professional when it came to his job. For a moment, the prince did consider hiring Tanya, but...

“She’d never entertain the thought of leaving Iris for us. Never in a thousand years.”

It was impossible.

Milo chuckled. “That’s part of what makes her so good, yes! I wish we could have met her before she had a mistress...”

“You only ever met her because of her mistress.”

“Oh, right. What a shame, what a shame.”

“Well? What’s the baron’s daughter after?”

“Hmmm, she meets with that merchant Divan about two or three times a month. They don’t talk about anything especially important. How things are going with Prince Edward, how things are at home. That sort of thing.”

“How things are with Edward, hm? I’m sure that’s quite important to Divan. But why was Divan trying to make another move in the first place? As long as the baron’s daughter has her hooks in Ed, he can pull any strings he wants once he’s on the throne.”

“I don’t know. Perhaps he’s feeling nervous about you, Your Highness. Or perhaps she was nothing but a pawn to him from the very start. One of the two.”

Rudy frowned; he seemed dissatisfied with Milo’s answer. “I’m sure it’s the latter. We have to take into account that he can’t just sit and wait for everything to pan out in the future. Things as they are aren’t good enough for him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s say Edward takes the throne, but the prime minister is still Louis de Armelia. Duke Armelia has a strong, fortified domain with financial wealth and abundant resources. He holds every official in the palace in the palm of his hand and is the highest-ranking noble. Even if Divan tried to use Edward, he wouldn’t be able to make any bold moves. Instead, it would be more effective to use the internal strife that presently exists within the nobility to weaken the kingdom and grow his own influence.”

“Hmm... I feel like that would be a complex plan with a lot of moving parts. And where would Tweil come into it?”

“Tasmeria’s land is fertile enough to be attractive in itself. Enarene’s report agrees. Just this year, Tweil’s harvest was the worst it’s been in a generation.”

Enarene was another “shadow” just like Milo, one who was currently operating under Baron Marvelas Messi, a noble who held the border with Tweil. Enarene relayed information between Alfred, and the baron and had recently gone undercover in Tweil. According to the newest report, Tweil had suffered

an exceptionally poor harvest. Winter lasted most of the year in that northern country, and not only was the soil poor—a condition of the cease-fire with Tasmeria had them paying an enormous amount of money to support the princess who had married into House Rubens.

In other words, they were cornered and could no longer afford to be patient. They would much rather try to destroy a fragile kingdom and take it over, rather than wait for a better future for their own. That was their philosophy, anyway.

“Well, it’s not my place to sort out what to do. And now I’m tired.”

“Is that the last of your report?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, yes. Not much else to say.”

“All right. Keep up the good work.”

“Yes, Your Highness.” Milo’s expression turned serious. Then he vanished as suddenly and soundlessly as he had first appeared.

After the prince gave Rudy a list of instructions, he took his leave. Now alone, he flipped through the documents on his desk, but his mind was somewhere else entirely.

He was thinking of the day Iris had let her emotions show and cried.

He knew he had pushed her, and hard. But he hadn’t expected her to explode like that. She had seemed so frail. Truly desperate. She always had such bright, glowing eyes and never showed any sign of fatigue. But that day...her slender shoulders had been bowed under such a heavy burden.

Alfred had seen the immense guilt she felt over bringing such troubles to her family. And it was no wonder, with her history. A noble daughter’s most important role was to get married and bring two houses together. After her engagement was broken, he couldn’t blame her for feeling she had to prove herself. Her driving force was her desire to be valuable to her family. Yet she was afraid that she had caused irreparable damage to them.

Seeing her like that had saddened him. At the same time, it made him angry. He wanted to tell her to stop hating herself. He chuckled bitterly. He really had it bad for that woman, if he found even that part of her adorable.

Just then, there was a knock at the door, and Rudy entered once more. Alfred listened to his report and let out a sigh.

“Rudy. I’m going to be asking you to take on another job for me.”

“With the military again?”

“Yes. General Gazell is there, after all.”

“That’s fine. I don’t mind getting some exercise.”

Rudy agreed with a smile, but then he froze when he glanced at the door.

The prince smiled wryly when he saw who was standing there. It was his little sister.

Afterword

IT'S BEEN SOME TIME since we last met. Thank you so much for reading the second volume of this story. I truly wasn't expecting the story to continue, so I really appreciate your support. Thank you so much.

To be honest, it didn't feel real when I was approached about getting my story published, not even after discussing it with my editor and sending off the manuscript. Every day felt like a dream, and it didn't seem the least bit like reality. It only hit me that it had really happened when I stood in the bookstore and saw the book on the shelf.

By the way, a friend of mine read the previous volume and remarked, "The afterword you wrote really sounded like you." Yup, they commented on the afterword before they said a thing about the actual content of the book. But I suppose my friend had actually been to my house and seen the bookshelf in question, so that perspective makes sense. All my friends said, "We told you to straighten up your bookshelf!" or "Why don't you just start buying e-books?"

But don't you feel a sense of accomplishment when you put books on a shelf? It's that certain buzz you get from collecting things. I tried to buy e-books and read them that way, but I always end up buying a physical copy of the book anyway. So it doesn't look like I'm going to whittle down my book collection anytime soon.

Also, imagining a book I wrote on a bookshelf makes me incredibly happy. Like maybe someone will go to clean up their bookshelf or go to read another book, and they'll get distracted by my book and think, "Oh, yeah, that's where that book was! Brings back memories..." Then they'll pick up the book and start rereading it. I love the thought of that.

In recent news, the manga version of *Accomplishments of the Duke's Daughter* was published in *Young Ace Up* in the April 2016 edition. I really love Suki Umemiya's vision of the *Duke's Daughter* manga. She's really brought all the characters to life. It reminded me once again of how amazing manga is. Iris's father, Louis de Armelia, appears in the third chapter, and I had to

murmur, “Ah, I forgot how intimidating her father is! Like a demon king or something!” But she’s really captured all of the characters’ individual styles. Thank you so much, Umemiya-sensei.

And thank you, everyone. Thank you to those of you who have been reading since this story was published on the internet. There are so many scenes in this published version that were not included in the first internet drafts. I really hope you enjoy seeing those differences.

Thank you also to my editor for giving me so much support. When I get advice from my editor, I get so inspired to write, thinking, “Ooh, how about I do this here?” or “I should add this here!” But mainly, I just want to hurry up and keep writing!

Apparently, once I get inspired, I just want to go all out. But putting all jokes aside, my editor’s words are really a huge source of my motivation. I can’t wait to keep working with you.

To Haduki Futaba-sama, thank you so much for your magnificent illustrations. Ever since I heard the second volume would be published, I couldn’t wait to see what the cover would look like. I want to keep diligently writing stories worthy of your art.

And to everyone who has helped me, given me comments, and encouraged me: I was only able to get this far because of all of you. Please keep supporting me.

And to the people who bought this book—thank you so much. I’m honored that you continued this journey with me after Volume One. I will work even harder to make sure you enjoy future stories. And I hope that we meet again soon.

—REIA



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